

Jonathan Edwards's Monism

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I

The 18th-century Calvinist philosopher and theologian Jonathan Edwards¹ is a monist. He's not just a monist in the sense in which Hobbes or Berkeley is a monist — someone who believes that there's only one kind of substance — but a monist in the sense in which the great heretic Spinoza is a monist.² There is, necessarily, only one substance.³

Edwards's monism is part of a simple and beautiful system. His fundamental ontology can be summed up by six, mainly negative, principles (the names are mine):

Continual creation. God conserves the world in existence at each moment by an act that is equivalent to the act of creation.

No action at a distance. Cause and effect cannot be located in different places or at different times.

1. All references to Edwards's work are to *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, cited by volume and page, as well as work title. *Free Will*, *Original Sin*, and *Religious Affections* were published during Edwards's lifetime; *The Nature of True Virtue* and *The End for which God Created the World* were intended for publication but only published posthumously. The other texts I refer to were not intended for publication.
2. Edwards does not seem to have known much about Spinoza. He refers to him at one point as the author of the view "that God may have a body; or rather, that the universe, or the matter of the universe, is God" (*Misc.* 1233, 23.166). (Cf. *Misc.* 1297, 23.242: "TOLAND was of the opinion that there is no other God but the universe, therein agreeing with Spinoza.") Edwards disapproves of this view, but his reaction to Spinoza is nowhere near as extreme as his reaction to the other great early modern bugbear, Hobbes: "As to Mr. Hobbes' maintaining the same doctrine [as me] ... I confess, it happens I never read Mr. Hobbes. Let his opinion be what it will, we need not reject all truth which is demonstrated by clear evidence, merely because it was once held by some bad man. This great truth, that Jesus is the Son of God, was not spoiled because it was once and again proclaimed with a loud voice by the devil." (*Freedom of the Will* 4.6, 1.374).
3. I shall return to the comparison between Edwards and Spinoza in the final section of this paper, where I ask whether Edwards's claim that there is only one substance should be understood as implying that there is only one *thing*.

No created powers. Only God has power and thus only God is a true cause.⁴

No created substances. God is the only genuine substance.

*No enduring things.*⁵ Nothing endures through time.

No matter. There is no matter.⁶

Some of these principles are unusual. As far as I know, none of Edwards's predecessors or contemporaries argued for *no enduring things*. And although many of Edwards's contemporaries worried about action at a distance, Edwards's principle *no action at a distance* is much stronger than theirs: as far as I know, nobody except Edwards worried about action at a *temporal* distance or thought that even a spatially contiguous effect was too far away from its alleged cause. However, the other four principles were relatively common. *Continual creation* was very widely accepted, although philosophers disagreed about the sense in which conservation and creation are equivalent. *No created powers* was accepted by Malebranche and others, *no created substances* was (*mutatis mutandis*) Spinoza's view, and *no matter* Berkeley's.

4. Given this principle plus the claim that God is not in space or time (*Misc.* 1208, 23.138), *no action at a distance* is redundant. However, *no action at a distance* deserves a place on the list because it is sometimes used as a premise for arguments for *no created powers*.
5. This principle may be redundant given *no created substances*: I think that traditional substance ontologies assume that only substances endure. However, the assumption is sufficiently hidden that it's worth bringing out *no enduring things* as a separate principle.
In fact, I think Edwards accepts the stronger principle *no persisting things*, although I do not try to make the case for this here. (See LoLordo 2014 for my argument.) This principle would *not* follow from *no created substances*.
6. The principles *no created powers*, *no created substance*, and *no enduring things* together might seem to make *no matter* redundant. (If matter is not a substance and does not endure through time and cannot act, what of the traditional conception of matter is left?) But it's worth thinking of it as a separate principle because Edwards adopted *no matter* before the other three negative principles.

Edwards seems to have adopted this system in his early twenties and maintained it until his death. He presented the system and some arguments for it in pieces written at different times and for different purposes, some of which were left unfinished and almost none of which were intended for publication. The argumentative structure is not always exactly the same: what look like premises in some texts are conclusions in others; what is alleged to be self-evident in one place is argued for in another; and so on. Nevertheless, the system as a whole is remarkably stable, and two main lines of argument run through it. One line of argument uses *no action at a distance* as its main premise, and infers *continual creation* and *no enduring things* from it. This line of argument supports *no created substance* and *no created powers* without quite implying them, for *no action at a distance* and *no enduring things* leave open the possibility of momentary substances that are immanent causes of their own states. I've discussed this line of argument elsewhere.⁷ All we need to know here is that it does not make clear the precise ontological status of whatever it is that's continually created.

Here I'll consider the second line of argument. It starts with the notion that properties must be upheld by something and asks what's doing the upholding, ultimately concluding that only God — and not matter — can uphold the properties of bodies. This yields the conclusion that there are no material substances and no powers thereof. Edwards later generalizes the conclusion to the case of immaterial substance as well, thus ending up with *no created powers* and *no created substance*. This second line of argument supports *continual creation* and *no enduring things* without implying them, for, again, it does not tell us what the created world is — only what it is not.

II

In 1721, the teenage Jonathan Edwards speculated about a universe without minds, and ventured the suggestion that such a world would exist "only in the divine consciousness" ("Of Being"; 6.204). A few

7. LoLordo 2014.

years later, he reiterated that “[t]he world, *i. e.* the material universe, exists nowhere but in the mind” (“The Mind” 34; 6.353) and that

[T]here 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 ... 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. (“The Mind” 13; 6.344)

Many years later, in the late 1740s and early 1750s, he returned to the point:

[T]here is no such thing as material substance truly and properly distinct from all those that are called sensible qualities What we call body is nothing but a particular mode of perception (“Notes on Knowledge and Existence”; 6.398).

[W]hen we say there are chairs in this room when none perceives it, we mean that minds would perceive chairs here according to the law of nature in such circumstances. (“The Mind” 69; 6.385)

It’s hard to read this and not think of Berkeley’s similar remark:

The table I write on I say exists, that is, I see and feel it; and if I were out of my study I should say it existed — meaning thereby that if I was in my study I might perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it. (*Principles* 1.3)

Edwards, like Berkeley, emphasizes that the *esse* of bodies is their *percipi*:

[I]n what respect has anything had a being, when there is nothing conscious of its being? ... Thus for instance, supposing a room in which none is, none sees the things in the room, no created intelligence: the things in the room have no being any other way than only as God is conscious [of them]; for there is no color there, neither is there any sound, nor any shape. (*Misc.* pp; 13.188)

[T]he world exists only mentally, so that the very being of the world implies its being perceived or discovered. (*Misc.* 247; 13.360)

Again like Berkeley,⁸ Edwards emphasizes that adopting immaterialism does not require us to revise ordinary language drastically: “Though we suppose that the existence of the whole material universe is absolutely dependent on idea, yet we may speak in the old way, and as properly and truly as ever” (*The Mind* 34; 6.353). But despite the similarities between Edwards’s immaterialism and Berkeley’s, there is a scholarly consensus that Edwards arrived at his immaterialism independently of Berkeley.⁹ The similarity is not as surprising as it seems at first glance. Edwards hadn’t read Berkeley when he was working out his immaterialism,¹⁰ but he had read many of the same things Berkeley read.¹¹

8. Berkeley insists that although immaterialism makes it, strictly speaking, false that “fire heats, or water cools”, nevertheless “in such things we ought to *think with the learned, and speak with the vulgar*” (*Principles* 1.51).
9. Wallace Anderson’s introduction to Edwards’s *Scientific and Philosophical Writings* (*Works* 6.76–79); Marsden 2003, 73.
10. Edwards did, however, become aware of Berkeley’s work later: in texts from 1726–1728, he refers to the *Principles* and the *New Theory* (26.102–103), and later to *Alciphron* (26.192).
11. He quotes Cudworth’s *True Intellectual System of the World* at great length (see *e.g.* *Misc.* 1352, 23.640–673). According to his *Catalogue of Books* (volume 26 of the *Works*), he read, or at least intended to read, Bayle’s *Dictionary* (entries

III

Edwards's argument for monism has three stages. In the first stage, he argues that bodies are nothing over and above resistance. This by itself is compatible with some forms of materialism. In the second stage, Edwards adds that resistance must be upheld by something, and that the only thing that could uphold resistance is God. Thus Edwards concludes that there is no matter, a conclusion which reinforces his belief (arrived at for other reasons¹²) that God exists. The same line of thought also yields restricted versions of the other fundamental metaphysical principles. In the third stage, he moves from immaterialism to monism, arguing that the powers and properties of minds — as well as bodies — can be upheld only by God. And, at this point, Edwards concludes that there are no created substances at all, only God.

The first stage begins by analyzing the folk view of bodies:

[W]hat idea is that which we call by the name of body? I find color has the chief share in it. 'Tis nothing but color, and figure which is the termination of this color, together with some powers such as the power of resisting, and

#236 and #414), Descartes's *Discourse* (#408); Hutcheson (#410); Maimonides (#268); Malebranche (#130, #303), as well as Norris (#26) and Arthur Collier (#664); Montaigne (#131); Newton's *Principia* and *Opticks* (#63, #194), as well as his theological writings (#373, #393); Newtonians like 's-Gravesande (#311) and Rohault (#70); and van Helmont (#75). But perhaps his two biggest influences are Locke, whose *Essay* occasioned the series of notes *The Mind*, and Henry More, who's said to be the most widely read philosopher in early 18th-century America (Fiering 1982, 16).

12. Edwards argues for the existence of God from immaterialism; from the fact that belief in God is "natural" (*Misc.* 268, 13.373); from the apparent design of the universe (*Misc.* 312, 13.394); and from the principle of sufficient reason (*Freedom of the Will* 4.13, 1.424; *The Mind* 54, 6.370; *Misc.* 880, 20.122), a principle which he thinks that we cannot help believing (*The Mind* 54, 6.370) and which is self-evidently true and universally recognized (*Misc.* 91, 13.254). However, he thinks that the most basic and most certain ground of belief is direct experience of the divine. Such an experience, in which Lockean new simple ideas are conveyed that could not come from any other source, makes it evident that God exists (*Religious Affections* 3, 2.205).

motion, etc., that wholly makes up what we call body.
(*The Mind* 27, 6.351; cf. *Misc.* 1340, 23.363)

However, Edwards thinks, it's uncontroversial that this idea of body is seriously flawed. The problem concerns color (and, implicitly, the other secondary qualities).¹³ The idea of color should not be a component of our idea of body, because bodies don't really have colors: "every knowing philosopher" agrees that "colors are ... strictly nowhere else but in the mind" (*The Mind* 27, 6.350).

This move is a bit worrying. Lots of early modern philosophers thought that color exists outside the mind (Locke, for instance, whose view Edwards certainly knew.) But all Edwards really needs to rule out is the possibility that color is a fundamental property of bodies, something bodies have over and above their extension and impenetrability. And those early moderns who thought that color is in bodies typically also thought that color and the other secondary qualities are reducible to the primary qualities of bodies.

The removal of color from our ordinary conception of body leaves us with a conception of body as that which has extension and impenetrability. Edwards, quite reasonably, thinks of this as the consensus view, and it's the view commonly ascribed to Clarke, Locke, More, and Newton, among others. Edwards argues against it on the basis of a claim that (as far as I know) is unique to him — that extension is a mode of resistance:

If color exists not out of the mind, then nothing belonging to body exists out of the mind but resistance, which is solidity, and the termination of this resistance with its relations, which is figure, and the communication of this resistance from space to space, which is motion, though the latter are nothing but modes of the former. Therefore,

13. Edwards does not use the terminology of primary and secondary qualities much, and when he does speak of primary qualities, he seems to mean something like *essential* qualities (e.g. *Things to be Considered an[d] Written Fully About* 31, 6.290).

there is nothing out of the mind but resistance. (*The Mind* 27, 6.351)

Two caveats are in order here. First, when Edwards talks about resistance, he's not talking about what Newton or Leibniz was talking about. Rather, he's talking about the power to resist penetration. For Edwards, impenetrability, resistance, and solidity are the same thing.

Second, when Edwards says that extension is a mode of resistance, he doesn't mean that *space* is a mode of resistance. The extension in question is *bodily* extension, not *spatial* extension. For there to be resistance, on Edwards's view, is simply for a certain region of space to resist incursion (*The Mind* 61, 6.379). One way for there to be resistance is for a certain part of space — say, a roughly spherical part of space about nine inches in diameter — to resist penetration. And when a certain part of space behaves in this way, we say that there is an extended, impenetrable thing present, a body.

That Edwards is here relying on the existence of some kind of space that exists prior to the bodies in it is clear in passages like the following:

Since ... body and solidity are the same, and ... resistance or solidity are by the immediate exercise of divine power, it follows that the certain unknown substance, which philosophers used to think subsisted by itself, and stood underneath and kept up solidity and all other properties ... is nothing at all distinct from solidity itself; or, if they must needs apply that word to something else that does really and properly subsist by itself and support all properties, they must apply it to the divine Being or power itself. ... So that the substance of bodies at last becomes either nothing, or nothing but the Deity acting in that particular manner in those parts of space where he thinks fit. (6.215)

This is reminiscent of Newton's suggestion in *De gravitatione* that God might have created bodies by assigning impenetrability to certain regions of space, rather than by creating material substances with the property of impenetrability.¹⁴

Newton's suggestion is a form of materialism without material substance. To get from his similar claim to immaterialism, Edwards needs to establish that resistance must be upheld by God. This is what the next two stages of the argument are intended to accomplish.

IV

In the second stage, Edwards claims that resistance cannot exist by itself but depends for its existence on some other thing, which, it turns out, can only be God. He gives two reasons to think that resistance cannot exist by itself, both of them relatively straightforward. First, resistance is a power, and powers don't act — things *with* powers act.¹⁵ Second, resistance is a property, and properties cannot exist all on their own; they must be properties *of* some thing. Edwards doesn't feel much of a need to defend this claim, since, he thinks, everyone accepts it already.¹⁶

The reason why it is so exceedingly natural to men to suppose that there is some latent substance, or something that is altogether hid, that upholds the properties of bodies, is because all see at first sight that the properties of bodies are such as need some cause that shall every

14. Newton, *De gravitatione* (ed. Janiak 27–28). Edwards couldn't have read this, but Reid 2003 suggests he might have known the view via Locke's suggestion that "the Extension of any Body is so much of that infinite Space, as the bulk of that Body takes up" (*Essay* 2.1.5.8).
15. In another context, Edwards insists on "the great impropriety of such phrases, and ways of speaking, as 'the will's determining itself'; because actions are to be ascribed to agents, and not properly to the powers of agents; which improper way of speaking leads to many mistakes, and much confusion, as Mr. Locke observes" (*Freedom of the Will* 2.1, 1.171–172).
16. A notable exception is Hume, but although the two philosophers were contemporaries, Edwards did not read any of Hume's work until late in life, long after his own views were formed. For more on Hume and Edwards, see Reid 2006.

moment have influence to their continuance, as well as a cause of their first existence. All therefore agree that there is something that is there, and upholds these properties, and it is most true, there undoubtedly is. (6.380)

Notice the way Edwards characterizes the relation between properties and substances. Substance is that which "upholds" bodies. Substance is also that which "shall ... have influence to their continuance, as well as a cause of their first existence". It's natural, Edwards seems to be saying, for us to think that properties inhere in something hidden because their continued existence requires a cause. At first this looks like a *non sequitur*. In many cases Edwards's contemporaries and predecessors thought that causation and inherence did not even involve the same relata. (Think of Descartes's physics, for instance: if we ask what causes the motion of body A, we'll point to another body; if we ask what that motion inheres in, we'll point to body A itself.) However, the cause Edwards has in mind here is not a cause of becoming but a cause of being. What causes the motion of body A, in *this* sense, is God, continually conserving the world in existence.

I will return to the notion of upholding in section VII. For now, let's just say that the upholding relation is an ontological dependence relation. We'll get some further understanding of what it involves by looking at the arguments that deploy it.

So: resistance must be upheld by something. What is that something? Edwards considers four options and rules out the first three:

- (1) resistance is upheld by the extension of bodies
- (2) resistance is upheld by space
- (3) resistance is upheld by a bare substratum
- (4) resistance is upheld by God

We've already seen what's supposed to rule out option (1): resistance cannot be upheld by bodily extension, because bodily extension is a mode of resistance.

We've also seen that Edwards himself thought that resistance is upheld by space at one point. This thought relied on identifying space with God and hence conceiving of space as absolute. Edwards's argument for the identification of space with God closely follows one given by Henry More.¹⁷ Its starting point is the premise that there is "a necessary, eternal, infinite, and omnipresent being" ("Of Being", 6.202). These four attributes apply to both space and God. So if space exists, then either it's something like a second God, or it just *is* God. And the first possibility is obviously unacceptable. So space must be God.

However, Edwards soon gave up the claim that space is God, and with it the whole notion of absolute space. For he came to think that we cannot conceive of empty space:

The idea we have of space, and what we call by that name, is only colored space, and is entirely taken out of the mind if color be taken away; and so all that we call extension, motion and figure is gone if color is gone. As to any idea of space, extension, distance or motion that a man born blind might form, it would be nothing like what we call by those names. All that he could have would be only certain sensations or feelings, that in themselves would be no more like what we intend by space, motion, etc., than the pain we have by the scratch of a pin And as to the idea of motion that such an one could have, it could be only a diversification of those successions in a certain way, by succession as to time. (*The Mind* 13, 6.343–344)

Edwards assumes that it follows from our inability to conceive of empty space that empty space is impossible. Space thus depends for its

17. In the *Enchiridion Metaphysicum*, chapter 8. More hedges the conclusion more than Edwards.

existence on the bodies in it. This renders the identification of space with God unacceptable: *God* does not depend for his existence on the things he has created. So if there is absolute space it is something like a second God, a second necessary, eternal, infinite, and omnipresent being. But having two such beings is just as unacceptable as making God dependent on creation. Edwards solves the problem by denying that space has any real existence at all.

Edwards also came to worry that the supposition of a world containing only absolute space and resistance is incoherent:

[T]here is nothing out of the mind but resistance. And not that, neither, when nothing is actually resisted; then there is nothing but the actual exertion of God's power, so the power can be nothing else but the constant law or method of that actual exertion. And how is there any resistance except it be in some mind, in idea? What is it that is resisted? It is not color. And what else is it? It is ridiculous to say that resistance is resisted. That does not tell us at all what is to be resisted. ...

Let us suppose two globes only existing, and no mind. There is nothing there, *ex confesso*, but resistance. That is, there is such a law that the space within the limits of a globular figure shall resist. Therefore there is nothing there but a power, or an establishment. And if there be any resistance really out of the mind, one power and establishment must resist another establishment and law of resistance, which is exceedingly ridiculous. ... But now it is easy to conceive of resistance as a mode of an idea. It is easy to conceive of such a power or constant manner of stopping or resisting a color. The idea may be resisted — it may move, and stop, and rebound; but how a mere power ... can move and stop is inconceivable The world is therefore an ideal one. (*The Mind* 27, 6.351)

A world containing only resistance in absolute space is a world of powers that have no objects and hence cannot be exercised. Hence a world containing only resistance in absolute space is impossible.

The last possibility Edwards considers and rules out is that resistance is upheld by a bare substratum:

... the certain unknown substance, which philosophers used to think subsisted by itself, and stood underneath and kept up solidity and all other properties, which they used to say it was impossible for a man to have an idea of ("Of Atoms", 6.215–216)

Who are these philosophers? Edwards could have found the notion of a bare substratum in Locke, who mocks it. But a more likely source is Henry More. More nicely articulates the featureless-substratum conception of substance in *The Immortality of the Soul*:

The Subject, or naked Essence or Substance of a thing, is utterly unconceivable to any of our Faculties. ... For the evidencing of this Truth, there needs nothing more then a silent appeal to a mans owne Mind, if he do not find it so; and that if he take away all Aptitudes, Operations, Properties and Modifications from a Subject, that his conception thereof vanishes into nothing, but into the Idea of a mere Undiversificated Substance; so that one Substance is not then distinguishable from another, but onely from Accidents or Modes, to which properly belongs no subsistence. (Book I, Ch. II, Axiome VII)

If you take away the "*Aptitudes, Operations, Properties* [in the narrow, technical sense] and *Modifications*", then you're left with the idea of something without properties in the broad sense. You're left, that is, with the idea of a bare substratum in which the properties are supposed to inhere.

Edwards objects to the notion that resistance is upheld by a bare substratum on the grounds that the whole notion of a bare substratum is absurd:

[T]he ideas we have by any of our senses: color, or visible extension and figure ... and ... the sensible qualities we have by other senses, as ... solidity ... and ... extension and figure ... that there should be any substance entirely distinct from any or all of these is utterly inconceivable. For if we exclude all color, solidity, or conceivable extension, dimensions and figure, what is there left that we conceive of? Is there not a removal in our minds of all existence, and a perfect emptiness of everything? (*Misc.* 1340, 23.363)

We cannot suppose that resistance is upheld by a bare substratum, because we simply cannot conceive of any such thing.

V

Edwards also has a second reason to deny that resistance can be upheld by a bare substratum: that the subject of resistance must be an agent with will and intellect. Notice that if this is compelling, it also rules out the possibilities of resistance being upheld by space or the extension of bodies. I'll approach why Edwards holds this indirectly.

Like many of his contemporaries, Edwards was a big fan of Newton's physics. And again like many of his contemporaries, he was deeply worried about the ontology of gravity. Many people were reluctant to think of gravity as an intrinsic power of matter, for two reasons. The Cartesian conception of matter as pure extension — thus inert — still had some currency. And even those who were willing to grant matter some active power still worried about gravitation because they found action at a distance suspect. One way of assuaging such worries was to say that bodies do not gravitate towards each other because of their

intrinsic nature: rather, God directly intervenes in the material world to produce the relevant phenomena.

Edwards writes that "it is universally allowed that gravity depends immediately on the divine influence" (*Things to be Considered an[d] Written Fully About* 23(a), 6.234–235). This is an exaggeration. But the view was indeed common. Consider one of Edwards's Puritan forefathers, Cotton Mather — the first American member of the Royal Society:¹⁸

Very various have been the Sentiments of the Curious, what Cause there should be assign'd for this great and catholick Affection of Matter, the *Vis Centripeta* 'Tis enough to me what that incomparable Mathematician, Dr. Halley, has declar'd upon it: That, after all, Gravity ... must be religiously resolv'd into the *immediate Will* of our most wise CREATOR, who, by appointing this *Law*, throughout the material World, keeps all Bodies in their proper Places and Stations. (*The Christian Philosopher, Essay* 21, 90)

Edwards argues that gravity is on a par with solidity in terms of a need for explanation:

If there be anything that makes us apt to seek more for a reason of gravity than solidity, 'tis because solidity is a quality so primary that the very being of the thing depends on it. If we remove the idea of it, there remains nothing at all that we can conceive. But we can conceive of something existing without thinking of gravitating at a distance. They are both of them essential and primary qualities, but there is this difference: the one is essential in order to the very existence, the other in order to the harmonious existence, of body. Though gravity itself

18. Edwards refers to several of Mather's books (*Misc.* 1334, 23.327), although not the 1721 *Christian Philosopher*. If Mather's argument sounds familiar, it's because, as he admits, he relies heavily on Samuel Clarke, (*Ibid*).

between the continuous parts is necessary in order to the existence, the mind does not so intuitively see how. But yet gravity is a quality more primary in these respects, and more essential, than mobility is, which none seek a reason for or in the least question to be a primary quality of matter. (*Things to be Considered an[d] Written Fully About* 31, 6.290)

Thus, he argues, if you think that gravity involves direct divine intervention, you should also think that *solidity* involves direct divine intervention:

And why is it not every whit as reasonable that we should attribute this action or effect [resistance] to the influence of some agent, as that other action or effect which we call gravity ...? We do not think it sufficient to say it is the nature of the unknown substance in the one case; and why should we think it a sufficient explication ... in the other? By substance, I suppose it is confessed, we mean only 'something', because of abstract substance we have no idea that is more particular than only existence in general. Now why is it not as reasonable, when we see something suspended in the air, set to move with violence towards the earth, to rest in attributing of it to the nature of the something that is there, as when we see that motion, when it comes to such limits, all on a sudden cease? For this is all that we observe in falling bodies. Their falling is the action we call gravity; their stopping upon the surface of the earth the action whence we gain the idea of solidity. (*The Mind* 61, 6.378)

I find this passage puzzling. To see why, think about the claim that we "do not think it sufficient to say" that bodies gravitate towards each other because it's in their nature to do so. It sounds at first like a sort

of dormitive-virtue worry: saying that bodies gravitate because it's in their nature to do so does not explain anything, any more than saying that opium has a dormitive virtue explains why it puts people to sleep. But this can't be right. Edwards's contemporaries who denied that bodies gravitate because of their nature didn't deny it because they thought it was trivial. They denied it because they thought it was false.

Edwards's explanation of why solidity or resistance requires direct divine intervention continues as follows:

It was before agreed on all hands that there is something there that supports that resistance. It must be granted now that that something is a being that acts there, as much as that being that causes bodies to descend towards the center. Here is something in these parts of space that of itself produces effects, without previously being acted upon. For that being that lays an arrest on bodies in motion, and immediately stops them when they come to such limits and bounds, certainly does as much as that being that sets a body in motion that was before at rest. Now this being, acting altogether of itself, producing new effects that are perfectly arbitrary, and that are no way necessary of themselves, must be intelligent and voluntary. There is no reason in the nature of the thing itself why a body, when set in motion, should stop at such limits more than at any other. It must therefore be some arbitrary, active and voluntary being that determines it. (6.378)

Why is resistance arbitrary? The term 'arbitrary' suggests two different things in Edwards's context: something arbitrary is something contingent (or at least not necessary in virtue of its own nature), or else something that has to do with *liberum arbitrium*, free will. If he's to avoid begging the question, Edwards must have the first sense in mind. He must be thinking that when two atoms collide, it's not necessary — or at least not necessary in virtue of the natures of the two

atoms — that they bounce off each other with a certain speed and direction. If God had laid down different laws, the two atoms might have moved off in a different direction, or come to a complete standstill, or ceased to exist altogether.¹⁹

VI

Let's stop and look at where we are. Bodies are essentially resistance. Resistance must be upheld by something. The only thing that can uphold resistance is God, for two reasons. First reason: resistance can't be upheld by bodily extension, because bodily extension is a mode of resistance; resistance can't be upheld by absolute space or a bare substratum, because they don't exist; and God is the only remaining possibility. Second reason: resistance can't be upheld by bodily extension or absolute space or a bare substratum or any other unthinking thing, because the power of resisting can be exercised only by something with a will and an intellect.

I said earlier that Edwards speaks of upholding where his contemporaries and predecessors might speak of causation or inherence. In the first argument, it looks like what upholds resistance is simply what resistance inheres in. But in the second argument, it looks like what upholds resistance is what *causes* it. So then why is the second argument supposed to be sufficient on its own? Why doesn't it leave open the possibility that resistance is exercised by God but inheres in something else — a material substance, for instance? In other words, why is this an argument for immaterialism instead of just an argument for occasionalism? Malebranche, for instance, would grant that the actions we attribute to bodies are in fact *God's* actions, but still accepts the existence of material substances.

The difference is this: Malebranche would not be happy with the first stage of Edwards's argument, that bodies are nothing over and above the power of resistance. Malebranche's bodies have some fundamental, categorical features — they are extended substances.

19. One outcome *is* ruled out by the natures of the two atoms: they cannot pass through each other, else they would not resist, and hence not be bodies.

Edwards's bodies have at their basis only a dispositional feature, resistance, and nothing to ascribe the disposition to.

VII

Edwards's conclusion, at this point, is that there is no mind-independent matter and no bodily powers — restricted versions of *no created substance* and *no created powers*. In fact, the argument we've seen so far issues in restricted versions of *all* the fundamental ontological principles. It shows that bodies are continually being created, in the sense that their existence at each moment requires upholding by something beyond themselves. It also explains why immaterialism implies a restricted version of *no enduring things*: the exercise of divine power, an action, isn't even the *kind* of thing that might endure through time. Finally, it implies a restricted version of *no action at a distance*, because after adopting immaterialism, Edwards reinterprets everyday language so that talk of a spirit being in some place is talk of it being able to act on some thing (*Misc.* 264, 13.370). If the only possible agents are spirits and a spirit is where it acts, then it's trivial that the cause is where the effect is.

The third and final stage of Edwards's argument for monism extends these conclusions to minds. This happens very quickly — perhaps too quickly. After arguing that there is no material substance, Edwards — once more like Berkeley — considers the objection that if we abandon material substance, we should abandon belief in *immaterial* substances too:

Answer to that objection, that then we have no evidence of immaterial substance.

Answer: True, for this is what is supposed, that all existence is perception. What we call body is nothing but a particular mode of perception; and what we call spirit is nothing but a composition and series of perceptions, or

a universe of coexisting and successive perceptions connected by such wonderful methods and laws. (6.398)

The argument is far more stripped down in the case of minds. Edwards's argument against material substance involves three strands. One is a set of claims about space, extension, and primary and secondary qualities. This falls out of the picture in the argument against thinking substance, because it would be irrelevant. Another is the claim that whatever upholds qualities must be a voluntary thinking agent. This too falls out of the picture in the argument against thinking substance, because it would be unhelpful: if there were created thinking substances, presumably they would be voluntary thinking agents. The last strand of Edwards's argument against material substance is the claim that only God can uphold qualities because a bare substratum is inconceivable, and Edwards reiterates this claim in the case of thinking substance:

The mere exertion of a new thought is a certain proof of a 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 in 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. (*Misc.* 267, 13.373; cf. *Misc.* 301, 13.387–388)

But why isn't there a third option? Why can't what upholds perception be a *mind* — a created thinking substance, as in Descartes?

This is a bit difficult to explain. As far as I can see, Edwards simply never considers this third option. He tends to rely on the Morean notion of a substance as something apart from its properties — the '*naked*

Essence or Substance of a thing'. But this is not a terribly satisfying explanation. It still leaves us thinking that Edwards *should* have considered the possibility that thoughts are upheld by a created substance. And it is hard to square a commitment to the Morean notion of substance as substratum with Edwards's commitment to the substantiality of God ("Notes on Knowledge and Existence", 6.398).

Perhaps we are better off saying simply that Edwards cannot conceive of created thinking substance apart from particular thoughts. In reading the *Essay*, Edwards would have come across Locke's critique of the Cartesian doctrine that the essence of the mind is thought,²⁰ and the concomitant claim that we do not know the essence of the mind. The upshot of this is that thought can be only a property of the mind, not its essence. And Edwards may be relying on that here.

VIII

Edwards, like Spinoza, is a monist: he holds that there is only one substance. Spinoza is sometimes read as making the further, far more radical claim that there is only one *thing*, thereby denying the reality of modes altogether. (This is the view recently called "existence monism".) Alternately, Spinoza is sometimes read as holding that there is only one *fundamental* thing, although it has as parts real things that are posterior to the whole. (This is the view recently called "priority monism".²¹) I share the dominant view that both readings are incorrect: Spinoza's modes are real things, and they are not parts of the one substance.²² I shall not defend this reading of Spinoza here. I bring it up solely as a way to raise the question: Is Edwards a monist about *things*,

20. In any case, Edwards holds that the mind is sometimes without acts or exercises (*The Mind* 69, 6.384–385). Hence he cannot hold that the mind is always thinking or that the essence of the mind is thought.

21. For the terms 'existence monism' and 'priority monism', see Schaffer 2010. The existence monist reading of Spinoza was suggested by Pierre Bayle and was standard among the German Idealists. See Melamed 2012 for details.

22. This view is defended by, among others, Guigon 2012, Laerke 2012, Melamed 2012, and Nadler 2012.

or just a monist about substances? In other words, what is the ontological status of the complex series of perceptions to which Edwards reduces the world? Are they things or not?

Edwards has surprisingly little to say about the positive status of the world. Throughout his work, he is far more inclined to say what creatures are *not* than what they are. But there is certainly some reason to think of created perceptions as things in their own right and to read Edwards as a monist about substances but not about things. The mere fact that he speaks of creation seems to imply that there is something, some thing or things, that God created. Moreover, it's hard to see how Edwards's moral and theological purposes could be reconciled with a flat denial of the reality of individual human beings.

There is also some reason to think of Edwards's created perceptions as *non-things*. Edwards is concerned to emphasize the radical dependence of creation in general, and humans in particular, on God. This is not simply a theoretical position for Edwards: one of the themes that recur in his discussion of his personal religious experiences is a "sense of ... universal, exceeding dependence on God's grace and strength, and mere good pleasure" (*Personal Narrative*, 16.803). And once he has argued that there are no finite substances or finite causes or enduring things, it's not clear what's left.

Moreover, Edwards's dominant model for understanding the relation between God and the creation is the neo-Platonist model of emanation:

All dependent existence whatsoever is in a constant flux, ever passing and returning; renewed every moment, as the colors of bodies are every moment renewed by the light that shines upon them; and all is constantly proceeding from God, as light from the sun. "In him we live, and move, and have our being." (*Original Sin* 4.3, 3.404)

Creatures are "images and shadows" (*Images of Divine Things*, 11.127) or "shadows of being" (*Misc.* 362, 13.434). The created world is in some

sense unreal, for "God and real existence are the same" (*The Mind* 15, 6.345).²³

One might conclude that there is simply a tension in Edwards's thought.²⁴ However, I think we can do better than that. We know that Edwards's God is real. But we need not choose between assigning the created world a reality equal to God and denying it reality altogether. We can instead read Edwards as holding that there are different degrees of reality. God's reality is *absolute* or *independent* reality; creatures have a lesser, dependent form of reality.

Three considerations speak in favor of ascribing this view to Edwards. First, there is some textual evidence that he distinguishes different degrees of reality, although it is hardly overwhelming (see *e.g.* *The Mind* 61, 6.381; *The Mind* 64, 6.382; *The Nature of True Virtue* 1, 8.546 n; *The Nature of True Virtue* 3, 8.571; *Misc.* tt, 13.190). Second, because ascribing this distinction to Edwards allows us to avoid reading his metaphysics as containing a significant tension, it has a great deal of explanatory value. Third, it fits naturally with the model of emanation: the light streaming from the sun is not *nothing*, but it is also not a thing on an ontological par with the sun itself.

One consideration speaks against it. The notion that there are degrees of reality has not been terribly popular in analytic metaphysics, and some readers may find it incoherent. The charge of incoherence is an important one — but it is not, I think, irrefutable. The fact that 21st-century metaphysicians find degrees of reality confused is only weak evidence that an 18th-century metaphysician could not have relied on them in the first place. And it ceases to be evidence at all once we recall that many early modern metaphysicians clearly *did* think in terms

23. In the background here is Edwards's Malebranchean conception that "the first Being, the eternal and infinite Being, is in effect, Being in general; and comprehends universal existence" (*Dissertation Concerning the End for which God Created the World* 1.4, *Dissertation Concerning the End for which God Created the World* 1.48.461).

24. Ken Winkler suggested this in his first Isaiah Berlin lecture in 2012: <http://tinyurl.com/gvxwszo>.

of degrees of reality. Remember, for instance, Descartes's 3rd *Meditation* argument for the existence of God.

This lets us give a more precise answer to whether Edwards is a substance monist or a thing monist. He holds that there is only one substance and that there is only one absolutely or independently real thing. At the same, there are many things with a lesser, dependent reality — a degree of reality consistent with their not being material, not being substantial, not being able to act, and not being able to endure. This is not the mere type monism of Berkeley and Hobbes: it is a claim about the number of substances, not just the number of substance-types. It is not the monism of Spinoza, for those who think that Spinoza is a monist of one kind or another. It is not a form of existence or priority monism as defined above: Edwards's created world is a thing in some sense, and it is not a part of God in any sense. But it is still a form of monism.

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