

Jonathan Edwards: Scientist of the Soul

In one of the most memorable passages in Jonathan Edwards' 1754 treatise, *Freedom of the Will*¹, he asks us to imagine the quandary of a drunkard who "has his liquor before him."² Edwards' aim in *Freedom of the Will* is to explicate the processes involved in the drunkard's decision: to drink or not to drink is not the question—rather, the question is why? The drunkard's quandary is a social reality as readily apprehensible to us today as it was to an 18th century minister. In our day alcoholism is considered a "disease"; extensive research has been carried out on the subject of physical addiction in a wide array of social scientific and biological disciplines, and generally the consensus opinion is that the "drunkard" will consistently choose to drink because the bio-chemistry of his brain has been so altered by a long period of substance abuse that the desire to avoid the intense discomfort of withdrawal will tend to outweigh the desire for sobriety. Excluding the bit about bio-chemistry, Edwards would have wholeheartedly agreed. However, the modern notion that the disposition of the drunkard constitutes a "disease"—which excuses his behavior because "he could not help it"—would not have sat well with him. For Edwards, the quandary of the drunkard only represents an extreme type of us all; we are all free to do as we please, but we are not free to please as we please. In Edwards' judgment, the drunkard is not excused because of his disease; it is his disease itself that warrants condemnation.

There is a temptation to consider Edwards' analysis of human psychology, of which the foregoing example is but one application, as merely an explication of Calvinist doctrine. Unarguably, *Freedom of the Will* was a defense of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination against the "modern writers" who believed "that the Calvinist notions of God's moral government are contrary to the common sense of mankind" because God's absolute sovereignty short circuited human moral responsibility.³ Consequently, it is easy to frame Jonathan Edwards as a theologian. Also, it is undeniably true that Edwards engaged the "modern writers" he took issue with on their own turf; more so that any of his contemporary New England ministers, he familiarized himself with the content of the Enlightenment project, the search for the natural laws of morality outside the aegis of Christendom, and used those materials to form his arguments.⁴ Consequently, it is easy to frame Jonathan Edwards as an Enlightenment philosopher.

The aim of this paper is to frame Edwards as a psychologist. While it must be conceded that Edwards the Theologian, and Edwards the Philosopher, are probably the

¹ Jonathan Edwards, *A Careful and Strict Enquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of that Freedom of the Will, Which Is Supposed to be Essential to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame* (Boston S. Kneeland, 1754)

² Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, Paul Ramsay ed., Vol. 1, *Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), Vol.1, p. 143

³ Edwards to John Erskine, July 7, 1752, *Works*, Vol. 16, p. 491

⁴ See, Noman Fiering's *Moral Thought and Its British Context* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1981) for a discussion of Edwards' engagement with 18th-Century moralist philosophers.

most useful ways of thinking about what Edwards meant to his time and the meaning of his legacy, it is my contention that Edwards the Psychologist must also be reckoned with in order to more fully understand the meaning of his work and legacy.

Such an interpretation runs the risk of appearing anachronistic and inappropriate; the discipline of psychology is commonly understood to have been born in the 1890s (concurrent with the publication of William James' *The Principles of Psychology* and the rise of experimental psychology) and, furthermore, the designation of "psychology" connotes a level of secularization and requirements of empirical evidence that Edwards' analysis of the human psyche appears to lack.⁵ However, it must be remembered that Edwards' analysis of the human psyche did not take place in an ivory tower; his observations were rooted in the laboratory of the Great Awakening—a context that daily afforded him opportunity for first hand observation of persons and the garnering of "empirical evidence." Also, it must be remembered that Edwards was not a puppet of his theological presuppositions; they formed the lens that he viewed the world through, just as we all are constrained by the construction of reality that the culture of our birth dictates, but it was his experience—and the sustained application of his mind to the task of understanding that experience—that determined the object of his vision which the lens refracted into distinctly Puritan shades.⁶ Furthermore, the fact that Edwards himself did not assume the mantle of "psychology" should not deter us from viewing him as a "psychologist" because he engaged himself with the most fundamental questions that psychology deals with none-the-less. Indeed, if we define "psychology," in the strictest etymological sense, as "the science of the soul," Edwards appears more deserving of the title than many of the secular practitioners that followed him.⁷

This paper will be structured around the three fundamental questions that fall within the discipline of psychology's province: (1) How do I know the things I know? (2) How do I come to feel the things I feel? (3) How do I come to do the things I do? Edwards had answers to all these questions—but they were not discrete answers. Rather, he offered us a coherent "theory of the mind" (and all existence for that matter) in which all aspects are interrelated. By the time we reach the answer to the third question we should have a surer understanding of Edwards' stance on the aforementioned "drunkard's quandary" and be in a position to make some tentative judgments about Edwards place in the history of psychology.

*The Unity of Knowledge, Feeling, and Action:
Jonathan Edwards' Theory of the Mind*

As has already been noted, Edwards viewed his intellectual calling to be a defense of Calvinist theology against the onslaught of the new science and philosophy inaugurated by the "age of reason." In doing so, his aim was not to reformulate Calvinist

⁵ See, *Explorations in the History of Psychology*, edited by Josef Brozek, (London: Associated University Press, 1984) for "The Origins of American Academic Psychology", 17-48

⁶ See, Harold P. Simmons, *Jonathan Edwards: Theologian of the Heart* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 13, for a description of how Edwards' "profound conviction that Calvinist theology was experientially true...that unless rooted in experience, it could not be anything more than intellectual speculation" was what "made his leadership during the great awakening most notable".

⁷ Jay Wharton Fay, *American Psychology Before William James* (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1939), vi

Doctrine in a manner that would make it consistent with “reason”; instead, he aimed at demonstrating that reason itself was already more consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ (as the divines of the Reformation had understood it) than the prevailing notions being circulated by the “modern writers.”⁸ Of all the “modern writers” Edwards engaged intellectually, John Locke and Isaac Newton serve as the most useful points of reference for the task at hand; contrasting Edwards’ “theory of the mind” with their work will help us bring Edwards’ epistemology into sharper relief.⁹

Newton’s *Principia Mathematica* (1687) was unarguably one of the most revolutionary texts in the history of Western Civilization—quite simply, nothing was the same for philosophers, theologians, and all others engaged in areas of human inquiry afterward. In the words of A. G. Ramsperger:

The discovery of the law of gravitation by Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727) was the master stroke that seemed to be the final word on the mechanics of nature. According to this law, every particle in the universe attracts every other particle with a force which is proportional to the product of the masses of the particles in question and inversely as the square of the distance between them. There is perhaps no other law which expresses in one simple statement such an apparent diversity of behavior...No wonder that men thought they were nearing the goal of a complete understanding of nature. Newton seemed to have guessed the key to God’s plan in the world.¹⁰

In Edwards’ day a new (Christian) world-view was still in the process of forming in response to the supposed discovery of “God’s plan.” Although the mathematical axioms Newton introduced were incontrovertible (i.e. if a cannonball with mass (X) is fired with force (Y) its acceleration is equal to (Y) divided by (X)), the metaphysical inferences that Newtonians were drawing from them were certainly not. Newton himself refused to advance metaphysical claims for his discoveries; in the preface to the 1717 edition of the *Opticks* Newton explains: “I consider [the principles governing particles], not as occult qualities, supposed to result from the specific form of things, but as general laws of nature...their truth appearing to us by phaenomena, though their cause be not yet discover’d.”¹¹ Of course, deists who subscribed to a clockwork conception of the universe were quick to advance the notion that the forces that acted on objects did in fact “result from the specific form of things”: theirs was a *mechanical* universe in which “physical processes occur by the direct transmission of force among discrete bodies.”¹² Edwards was horrified by the tendency of his contemporaries to erroneously consign God to the remote edge of the post-Newtonian universe (relegated to the status of merely the

⁸ George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 437

⁹ It is not being suggested here that Locke and Newton constituted the entire corpus of thought that Edwards imbibed. For the argument that Edwards “ought to be seen in the larger context of the Atlantic intellectual community in the first half of the eighteenth century” see Norman Fiering’s *Jonathan Edwards Moral Thought and Its British Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), pp. 13-14.

¹⁰ Ramsperger, *Philosophies of Science*, p. 24, quoted in, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, by Douglas J. Elwood (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), p. 49

¹¹ Newton, *Opticks*, 401, quoted in “Jonathan Edwards and Determinism” by Ryan D. Tweney, *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*: Vol. 33(4) Fall 1997, p. 368

¹² For a discussion of the difference between deterministic, mechanical, and materialist universes, see Ryan D. Tweney’s “Jonathan Edwards and Determinism”, *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*: Vol. 33(4) Fall 1997, pp. 366-369

first cause) when the vision of universal harmony conjured by Newton was, to Edwards, a testament to the centrality of Being to existence.¹³

Similarly, Edwards took exception with aspects of the psychological analogue to Newtonian physics propounded by John Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690)—though it must be admitted that Locke was also inspirational to Edwards in his own way.¹⁴ In the *Essay*, Locke sought to determine the laws that governed the interior of human reality in the same manner that Newton had determined the laws that govern the exterior: for Locke it was all well and good that we could now calculate the trajectories of cannon balls and the motion of planets, but how was it possible that human knowledge could exist on such a grand scale—and, as long as we’re asking, how was it that knowledge came to exist at all? Ultimately, these questions would defy the type of definitive answers that Newtonian physics found for the concrete world; in this area of human inquiry metaphysics could not be separated from scientific analysis (a fact that Edwards was quick to point out).

However, it certainly was not for lack of trying: as much as possible, the Newtonian model of the universe was transposed upon the human psyche. At birth Locke “supposed the Mind to be white Paper, void of all Characters, without any Ideas”—in essence an argument that prior to experience the mind could not, properly, be said to exist at all.¹⁵ In this manner, he set up the mind as the analogue of Newtonian empty space and “ideas” as the mental equivalent of “atoms.” Locke believed that “simple ideas” entering the field of the mind via the senses (i.e. sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste) were compounded according to as yet to be determined laws of motion, resistance, and attraction; these “complex ideas” constituted the sum of all human knowledge—everything from a strawberry’s flavor to the complexities of Newtonian physics. In Locke’s phraseology, knowledge was “nothing but the perception of the connexion of and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our ideas.”¹⁶ Needless to say, the implication of this epistemology—namely, that if all ideas are derived from sensory stimuli then no ideas are derived from God—were disagreeable to Edwards.

Furthermore, if we consider knowledge to be *caused by* the external universe then it becomes unclear what knowledge we can claim *of* the external at all. For example, according to Locke’s epistemology the instance of a man looking at an apple is an occasion in which reflected light enters the field of the human mind wherein the idea of

¹³ Elwood, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), pp. 50-51

¹⁴ The question of Locke’s influence on Edwards is one of the perennial historiographical issues that confront Edwardsian scholars. Samuel Hopkins—Edwards’ disciple, friend, and first biographer—dates Edwards’ first reading of Locke in his thirteenth year and, by virtue of citing no other intellectual influences, assigns it seminal importance in the germination of Edwards’ thought. Recent scholarship has suggested a much later first encounter (see, on this topic, Wallace Anderson’s discussion in *Edwards, Scientific and Philosophical Writing*, pp. 16-18, 24-26). Furthermore, the relative importance of Locke’s contribution to the young Edwards’ reading list has also been questioned (see, on this topic, Norman Fiering’s “The Rationalist Foundations of Jonathan Edwards’s Metaphysics,” in Hatch and Stout, eds., *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience*, pp. 260-287).

¹⁵ Leon Chai, *Jonathan Edwards and the Limits of Enlightenment Philosophy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 9

¹⁶ Locke, *Essay*, II, pp. 167-168, quoted in James Hoopes’ “Jonathan Edwards Religious Psychology”, *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 69, No. 4 (Mar., 1983), pp. 849-865

“redness” is created. This created idea of “redness” is a “secondary quality” that can only properly be said to exist in the human mind. Conversely, “redness” cannot be said to exist “in the object” itself. Locke left the “primary qualities” “in the object” to the domain of Newtonian physics—the true nature of things being outside direct human experience. To Edwards this was pure rubbish: the apple minus “redness” is not an apple at all—it is an entity not only divested of “secondary qualities” but of existence itself.¹⁷

Edwards subscribed to an Idealist metaphysic that addressed all of the materialist and mechanical implications of Newton and Locke: it simultaneously asserted the “primacy” of Lockean (so-called) “secondary qualities,” designated God the source of knowledge, and emphasized the centrality of Being to existence. His success in countering the metaphysical claims being advanced on both the macroscopic level by Newtonians and the microscopic level by Lockeans lay in his ability to carry out the logic of their own arguments to the point of absurdity. But it was not the scientific principles he refuted—it was the patent absurdity that either Newtonian “atoms” or Lockean “ideas” could be self-possessing in their being and action. Although the notion that God played an active role in sustaining creation (i.e. that substance was not “self-possessing”) had been the common coinage of Christian theology from the time of Augustine through the Reformation, Edwards went a step further: in counterpoint to the *Being-in-absentia* proposed by deists he not only asserted that God *sustained* the universe—he asserted that the universe was being continually *created* in every moment.¹⁸

In an exceedingly simple, but none-the-less forceful, argument taken from Edwards’ essay “On Atoms,” Edwards asks to reconsider one of the new physics’ standard theses: that all bodies are composed of indivisible units known as atoms. Edwards reasons that since these atoms are by definition indivisible, to divide an atom would be to dematerialize it; therefore the being of the atom is in essence solidity itself. If so, Edwards queries, what force maintains the solidity of the atom? The standard reply of those inclined to view atoms as “self possessed” is that the being of the atom itself is what resists division, but this argument has been eliminated by previously asserting that solidity itself is the whole being of the atom. The only answer left is “that it is God himself, or the immediate exercise of his power, that keeps the parts of atoms...together.” And since the solidity of an atom is the whole of its being, then God Himself is the being of the atom: being becomes permeated with Being. Furthermore, Edwards pithily remarks, “if any say that [merely] the nature of atoms is an infinite power, [they] say the same that I do”—God being synonymous with “infinite power.”¹⁹

This proof of the non-existence of substance and God’s immediate agency dovetails neatly with Edwards’ critique of Locke: a hypothetical object stripped of “secondary qualities” (i.e. color, mass, motion) could not be said to exist in the mind and, therefore, must be predicated on the metaphysics of material substance previously debunked.²⁰ Thus objects can only be said to exist *within* the mind—and the obvious

¹⁷ Robert W. Jensen, *America’s Theologian*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 30

¹⁸ Elwood, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, p. 35

¹⁹ Jensen, *America’s Theologian*, p. 28, (quotes taken from, YE6: 214) It should be noted here that this proof is no longer applicable since atoms are no longer supposed to be indivisible by physicist. However, the fact that physicists no longer believe there to be any indivisible “substance” indicates their agreement with Edwards on this point; Edwards was right all along: quite simply, there is no ultimate “self-possessing” matter.

²⁰ Jensen, *America’s Theologian*, p. 31

continuity of objects regardless of human observation is only possible because, even “in a room shut up,” tables and chairs that cease to have a human reality still exist “in God’s Consciousness.”²¹

Furthermore, the heuristic device of the “blank slate” that Locke presupposes proves untenable: while Edwards would have agreed with Locke that a man who had never seen the color red would have no innate idea of “redness,” he would have argued that the same man, upon being presented an apple, would immediately understand that the color red belonged to the same class of ideas as “green” or “yellow”—and, therefore, some ideas may be innate.²² However, the distinction assumes a devalued importance under Edwards’ metaphysical idealism: if all substances (including human sense organs) are non-existent except in mind, then all sensory experiences are merely “God’s stated order” for communicating ideas to us. Therefore, the ideas derived independently of sensory perception are not *necessarily* of a different kind (depending on the way you look at it). In Edwards judgment, we know what we know only through occasions in which God incites in us ideas, weather those occasions are consistent with Lockean epistemology or not.

However, Edwards believed that some ideas *were* of a different kind, and it is to a great extent due to his resolute insistence on this point that the philosophical and theological arguments outlined above were formulated. I am, of course, speaking of the ideas that compose genuine religious experience: a class of ideas that Edwards knew existed *experientially* via his own conversion experience (Edwards dates his own conversion experience to his last year in college, when God struck him down with pleurisy and “shook me over the pit of hell”²³), *before* he formulated his critique of the attendant metaphysics of Newtonian physics and Lockean psychology. During the Great Awakening of the 1730s and 40s Edwards bore direct witness to incredible religious enthusiasms in his pastorate of North Hampton. Edwards observed in his *Faithful Narrative* (1737): “the town seemed to be full of the presence of God: it was never so full of love, nor so full of joy; and yet so full of distress, as it was then...the assemblies in general were, from time to time, in tears while the Word was preached; some weeping with sorrow and distress, others with joy and love, others with pity and concern for the souls of their neighbors.”²⁴

The preceding excerpt illustrates the great significance Edwards attached to the emotional component of knowledge: the Word conveyed not only dry reason but the power to invoke tears and joy. Furthermore, it was not only in religious experience that knowledge was inextricably bound with feeling. In the words of James Hoopes:

[For Edwards] human beings are willful or emotional in their perception of all ideas, moving toward or away from an idea depending on whether the mind is predisposed to be pleased or displeased by the idea. He called such emotion a ‘sense of the heart’ for physiological reasons; God has so joined soul and body that as a soul experiences pleasure or displeasure in its ideas it stirs the blood and causes ‘some bodily sensation, especially about the heart.’²⁵

²¹ Hoopes, *Consciousness in New England*, p. 71

²² Hoopes, “Religious Psychology”, p. 854, quotation from, Edwards, “On Atoms,” 216

²³ Edwards, *Personal Narrative*, from *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, edited by John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 282

²⁴ Edwards, *Faithful Narrative*, quoted in, *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, p. 63

²⁵ Hoopes, *Consciousness In New England*, 81, quotes from *Religious Affections*, ed. John E Smith, p. 96

However, the “sense of the heart” invoked by the knowledge of God’s Word in the proceeding excerpt from the *Faithful Narrative* was a special *kind* of heart sense: it was a “new spiritual sense.” Persons with this new sense were able to experience a level of reality denied to others; it was the difference between having a “speculative knowledge” of a strawberry (i.e. looking it up in an encyclopedia) and tasting the strawberry itself. However, Edwards explains, the “new spiritual sense is not a new faculty of understanding, but it is a new foundation laid in the nature of the soul.”²⁶ Psychologist James G. Blight refers to this phenomenon as a reorganizing of the “cognitive-attitudinal structure” of the mind: the grace of God active in the conversion experience redistributes a persons deepest loves and hates—thus initiating a revolution in the affectional-system regulating the correspondence between knowledge and feeling.²⁷ Consequently, after regeneration, the Word of God, from the *Faithful Narrative* excerpt, has the power to invoke tears and joy, despite being the same knowledge that would affect yawns from a pre-conversion assembly.

Interestingly, the *kind* of idea introduced by God in the being of the converted appears to be akin to the associational ideas (i.e. the idea that “blue” belongs to the same class of ideas as “green”) Edwards supposed were “innate”: both are arrived at through other means than sensory experience. However, they do differ in an important sense: associational ideas are part of the original cognitive-attitudinal structure (which, as Edwards explains in *Original Sin*, is defective of its own accord, not by God’s design), but “grace” is a later alteration achieved through “divine influx.”²⁸ The degree of significance that Edwards attributes to the alteration of cognitive-attitudinal structures by God was an entirely new development in Puritan theology. As James Hoopes has demonstrated, Edwards believed even miraculous visions were comparatively common occurrences next to God’s work in regeneration: “If a person has anything revealed to him [such as a fiery cross in the noon-day sky] from God,” Edwards told his parishioners, it is but “dross and dung” compared to a genuine conversion.²⁹ This is a sensational statement that, one can only assume, baffled many of his parishioners—but it is a logical one. If we consider, as Edwards did, all ideas to be created immediately by God, the religious experience is the only one that is qualitatively different. According to Edwards, *we feel what we feel*, in any given instance, as a direct function of the configuration of our affectional-systems, lodged in our cognitive-attitudinal-structures, which governs the hierarchy of our deepest loves and hates—and only the genuine religious experience, incited by “divine influx,” can orient us in such a manner that our affections will compel us toward our only true interest: salvation.

However, while establishing the “indubitable certainty” of genuine religious experience’s existence, *Religious Affections* also establishes the uncertainty that one has truly been “saved”: although Edwards believed that “there is no true religion where there is no religious affection,” great emotional enthusiasms are, in themselves, no guarantee of a true conversion (one should never underestimate the tricks of Satan).³⁰ Edwards did

²⁶ Edwards, *Religious Affections*, p. 272

²⁷ Brozek, *Explorations*, pp. 75-76

²⁸ See, Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards Moral Thought*, p. 125, for the argument that Edwards believed “grace” was not achieved through sensory experience, but through “divine influx.”

²⁹ Hoopes, *Religious Psychology*, p. 863, quote taken from Jonathan Edwards, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival*, in *The Great Awakening*, ed. C.C. Goen (New Haven: 1972) pp. 436-37

³⁰ Edwards, *Religious Affections*, p. 95

offer signs and methods for determining genuine salvation in two publications—*Distinguishing Marks* (1741) during the height of enthusiasms, and *Religious Affections* (1746) after the enthusiasms had subsided—but he was never able to provide a definitive litmus test: conversion was an un-testable theory (consider the confusion a potential convert faced when trying to determine if his/her “esteem for Jesus” (the first Distinguishing Mark) had been raised high *enough*).³¹ In this respect, Edwards was butting his head against the same fundamentally insoluble problem that cognitive psychologists continue to grapple with to this day: the mind remains a black box that can only be observed from without.

Ultimately, the only test that may determine if a person has been regenerated by the grace of God lies in the attrition of years; at certain times and places an un-regenerated person may exhibit the characteristics of true Christian piety, but the over all tact of a person’s life will inevitably betray the true secrets that lie in his/her heart.³² In the posthumously published *The Nature of True Virtue* (1765) Edwards asserts, “True Virtue most essentially consists in benevolence to Being in general.”³³ Benevolence to “being” (not in general) is a common thing among the saved and damned alike; after all, the love of those who love, and are kind, to us is of the same type as a house cat has for his master. But “true virtue primarily consists, not in love to any particular beings, because of their virtue or beauty, nor in gratitude, because they love us.”³⁴ The truly virtuous person’s affectional system (that which regulates the correspondence between “knowledge” and “feeling”) causes him/her to feel love for the true good and the true beauty: the true good is more than the well-being of one-self and one’s family—it is the well-being of all God’s creatures (even one’s enemies)—and true beauty is more than a pleasing harmony of physical shape and proportion—it is the act of Christian kindness which is harmonious with the shape and proportion of creation.³⁵ The affectional systems of the un-regenerate differ only in the narrow and erroneous definitions of beauty and good that they correspond with love. Persons with such a defective correspondence between knowledge and feeling may be able to counterfeit the *appearance* of true virtue in some instances (i.e. when benevolence for “being” coincides with benevolence for “Being”), but will never be able to sustain benevolent behavior in instances where they feel no love. For Edwards, people always *do what they do* according to the overall feeling of attraction (love) or repulsion (hate) that they feel toward a course of action or object.

It was on the basis of this conviction that Edwards formulated his defense of the Calvinist doctrine of pre-destination (or, to put it in secular terminology, determinism) in

³¹ Brozek, *Explorations*, p. 82

³² Hutch, *Jonathan Edwards Analysis of Religious Experience*, from *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, Vol. 6, Issue 2, 1978, p. 28

³³ Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, from *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, p. 245

³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 248

³⁵ See, Roland A. Dellatré’s “Religious Ethics Today: Jonathan Edwards, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Beyond,” in Lee and Guelzo, eds., *Edwards in Our Time*, pp. 67-85, for a discussion of how the “Edwardsian aesthetic...makes his work peculiarly relevant to the broader question of religious ethics in our time.”

Freedom of the Will.³⁶ It had long been a mainstay of Calvinist theology that an omniscient Creator—existing outside of “time”—necessarily knew which persons would ultimately reject salvation and what persons would repent from the moment of creation: this was the doctrine of predestination. But Edwards’ defense of it was not merely a knee-jerk response to an attack on tradition; as the preceding discussion of Edwards’ epistemology and his understanding of the correspondence between knowledge, feeling, and action has demonstrated, Edwards knew the doctrine to be *experientially* true. For Edwards, to suggest that people could achieve salvation on their own accord, and that God did not know beforehand what a person would do in any given instance, was to suggest that love for the truly good and beautiful was not a necessary precondition for acting with virtue. This, Edwards believed, was pure nonsense: an affection was a feeling that spurs one to action, and action in relation to an object without a corresponding feeling of attraction (love) or repulsion (hate) does not exist. Furthermore, the feelings that we feel in relation to an object are a direct result of the “affectional systems” lodged in our “cognitive-attitudinal structures”—which, in turn, are composed of the “ideas” God incites in our minds through Lockean sensory experience or, more rarely, “divine influx.”

However, very similar logic—when divorced from Edwards’ metaphysical idealism—could be subversive to Puritan religious conviction. Thomas Hobbes, among other practitioners of the new philosophy, also espoused a type of determinism—but his was a determinism based on a purely materialist metaphysic.³⁷ Hobbes conceived of the will as nothing more than an extension of human appetites: the choice an individual made was nothing more than the last in a series of appetites. This was a very similar line of logic to the one Edwards made when he asserted that “the will always is as the greatest apparent good is”³⁸; if we consider “the greatest apparent good” to be what a person also has the greatest “appetite” for, it amounts to the same thing.³⁹

But, when presented by a secular voice, this same message carried the implication that human beings were the playthings of faceless matter, dancing at the behest of natural law to a meaningless tune; human destiny was still decreed, but it was no longer God that was calling the shots. In the minds of many Puritans (termed Arminians) the only way to salvage any sense of moral responsibility was to assert the freedom of the will: essentially denying the necessity of a pre-determined choice, regardless of the person’s disposition or antecedent events.⁴⁰ Furthermore, this flight toward Arminianism was exacerbated by the rise of the capitalist market economy that encouraged individuals to self-define themselves; previous generations defined the “self” exclusively in terms of community,

³⁶ See, Hoopes, *Consciousness in New England*, p. 87, for a discussion of how “in retrospect it is possible to see...that *Freedom of the Will* (1754) and *Original Sin* (1746) were coda to his great achievement in *Religious Affections* (1746).”

³⁷ Although Hobbes’ *Of Liberty and Necessity* (1654) had been published a full century before *Freedom of the Will* (1754) his ghost still vexed Puritan sensibilities. Edwards, commenting on the remarkable similarities between his treatment of the will and Hobbes’ commented, “we need not reject all truth which is demonstrated by clear evidence, merely because it was once held by some bad man.” *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Ramsay, p. 430, quoted in, Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards Moral Thought*, p. 273

³⁸ Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, from *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, p.197

³⁹ Allen C. Guelzo, “From Calvinist Metaphysics to Republican Theory: Jonathan Edwards and James Dana”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (Jul., 1995), p. 405

⁴⁰ See, Allen C. Guelzo, *Edwards on the Will*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press: 1989), pp. 10-14, for the Arminian context.

but New Englanders who were beginning to act as autonomous economic units by Edwards' time had different ideas. Such persons were encouraged to believe in a personal power to transform their condition economically, and this attitude transferred into a belief that they could transform their moral behavior through "sheer force of will" likewise.⁴¹ Consequently, when composing *Freedom of the Will*, Edwards had to do more than demonstrate that the will was determined logically; he had to also demonstrate that a determined will did not negate moral responsibility for human actions in a way that would still convince his readers that their own salvation could not be obtained through unassisted effort.

Edwards accomplished this task by delineating two distinct forms of causation that were at play in human choice: "natural" necessity, and "moral" necessity. Natural necessity refers to "such necessity as men are under through the force of natural causes; as distinguished from what are called moral causes, such as habits and dispositions of the heart, and moral motives and inducements."⁴² In this sense only, men were the playthings of senseless matter: natural necessity does render it impossible for certain actions to take place without regard for human desire or inclination. An obvious example would be a man so inclined to step off the edge of a building and fly with the birds in the sky. Regardless of his inclination, this is a natural inability—for it is a "natural necessity [that] men's bodies move downward, when there is nothing to support them."⁴³

Moral necessity, however, refers precisely to the inclination—or "motive" as Edwards termed it—that directed the man to step off the edge of the building (of course, any such desire to fly with the birds would also have to be accompanied by a profound lack of common sense). This is precisely the form of necessity outlined above; a person's actions are dictated by his/her disposition (the configuration of his/her cognitive attitudinal structures) as surely as gravity will pull a person back down to Earth if he/she were foolish enough to step off the roof of a building. These are the causes of actions that might be termed psychological or mental causes by persons today. In so framing the problem in this manner, Edwards demonstrated the impossibility of "willing" oneself to heaven; the will was determined by antecedent events and the "habits and dispositions of the heart" that those events shaped—it simply had no power to be other than it was. And, consequently, human beings too have no power to be other than who they are.

Which, of course, brings us back to the "drunkards quandary" that we began with. Certainly, modern sensibilities are in agreement with Edwards' assessment of the drunkards' moral inability to desist in his debauchery. However, as previously stated, Edwards believed that this was no excuse; moral inability was grounds for reproach. Edwards believed that persons recoiled from this judgment primarily because they confused the proper moral evaluation of "actions" with the proper moral evaluation of dispositions. Edwards asks of persons who would attribute praise and blame to actions, rather than disposition, how they should evaluate Jesus' moral nature. Certainly, such persons would be inclined to heap praise on Jesus' many acts of kindness and charity. But, Edwards queries, was it not true that Jesus had a moral inability to do otherwise? Was it not God's will that Jesus be the one blameless man to ever live? If so, the same

⁴¹ See, Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, pp.438-439, for the idea that *Freedom of the Will* was a palliative to the invention of the "modern self".

⁴² Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, from *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, p. 201

⁴³ Ibid, p. 201

logic that would excuse the drunkard's behavior would also divest Jesus of praise-worthiness—which is, of course, pure nonsense.⁴⁴ Furthermore, in Edwards assessment:

If the essence of virtuousness or commendableness, and of viciousness or fault don't lie in the nature of the dispositions or acts of mind, which are said to be our virtue or our fault, but in their cause, then it is certain it lies nowhere at all...If the vice of a vicious act of will, lies not in the nature of the act, but the cause; so that its being of a bad nature will not make it at all our fault, unless it arises from some faulty determination of ours as its cause, or something in us that is our fault; then for the same reason, neither can the viciousness of that cause lie in the nature of the thing itself, but in its cause...and thus we must drive faultiness back from step to step, for a lower cause to a higher, in infinitum: and that is thoroughly to banish it from the world, and to allow it no possibility of existence anywhere in the universality of things.⁴⁵

Thus, if we are to transfer blame from the drunkard to the “disease” the drunkard is stricken with, we are forced to negate any form of moral accountability whatsoever. The blame lies with the drunkard and nowhere else—or there is no such thing as blameworthy behavior at all. In this point, Edwards demonstrated not only that a determined “will” does not negate moral responsibility—he also demonstrated that a determined will places moral responsibility more firmly where it belongs.

But still the modern person hesitates to embrace this analysis. We are privy to knowledge Edwards was not and, consequently, we believe we can make a more accurate assessment of the need for blame in the “drunkard's quandary.” For instance, we know that there is a genetic component to alcoholism. One can imagine the possibility of two fraternal twin brothers that grew up in the same household and received the same moral instruction side by side over the course of a lifetime—the only difference being that one inherited the gene that predisposes him to alcoholism and the other did not. We can imagine the course of their lives running roughly parallel up until the fateful day that they each have their first alcoholic drink. One brother becomes slightly inebriated and hits the sack early—only to wake up the next morning and continue on with his life exactly as before. The other brother begins a life-long dependency that affects his ability to function in society. What justice is there in blaming the poor brother unfortunate enough to have inherited this wicked gene we may ask?

However, it may be prudent to broaden the parameters of the question: are there not many wicked genes that afflict many persons? What about compulsive shoplifters? What about liars, cheats, and murders? Are there not genetic components to their afflictions? Furthermore, is it not possible that the human condition is an affliction in and of itself? This is what Edwards believed, and in *Original Sin* (1758) Edwards rounded out his complete Calvinist Psychology by way of explicating why; *Religious Affections* and *Freedom of the Will* had demonstrated the mechanisms by which human nature operates, but *Original Sin* describes the actual nature of sinful human conduct.⁴⁶ Essentially, Edwards argues in *Original Sin* that the fall from grace that accompanied Adam and Eve's original sin was imputed to all of their progeny. The justice or injustice in passing on the sin's of the father to the son and the apparent culpability of an omnipotent and omniscient God in allowing evil in the first place are both issues that Edwards addressed at length, but do not concern us here. What does concern us is his assertion that every human being who had ever lived had sinned against God by virtue of

⁴⁴ Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards Moral Thought*, pp. 315-316

⁴⁵ Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Ramsay, pp. 337-338

⁴⁶ Tweney, p. 366

simply existing.⁴⁷ We sin from our first breath out of the womb—not because of actions though. One could hardly imagine an infant in the cradle having a *natural* ability to engage in sinful activity: poor motor skills, and poor eyesight present the least of the many difficulties in the infant’s attempts to do that. But he/she does sin in the sense that he/she is born with a rebellious heart that only knows hunger and desire: a heart that only properly knows how to love itself and that which gives it pleasure. That is the nature of original sin—the state of anti-grace. This innate depravity is perhaps even more evident from our vantage point than Edwards’ (the atrocities of the twentieth century bear vivid testimony to his prescience): persons prior to the reorganization of their cognitive attitudinal structures via religious conversion do tend to choose private ends and selfish actions. They do so because, without knowledge of “true good” and “true virtue,” they see these ends and actions as the most pleasing. Just as the drunkard with his “drink before him” sees the action of drinking as the most pleasant. The question of his genetic composition is beside the point: we all have our crosses to bear—alcohol just happens to be the drunkards.

Furthermore, aside from the question of praise and blame, we would do well to ask ourselves what type of remedy we, with our enlightened modern sensibilities, have to offer the drunkard. Surely, we have some reasoned and scientific manner to treat the drunkard’s “disease.” And, as a matter of fact, we do. Alcoholics Anonymous has been curing drunkards since 1930, and they claim to have a sure-fire 12 Step Program that, if all twelve steps are successfully completed, virtually guarantees a cure. A review of these 12 Steps should prove edifying:

12 Steps⁴⁸

1. We admitted we were **powerless** over our addiction - that our lives had become unmanageable
2. Came to believe that a **Power greater than ourselves** could restore us to sanity
3. Made a decision to **turn our will and our lives over to the care of God** as we understood God
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs
6. Were entirely ready **to have God remove all these defects** of character
7. Humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it

⁴⁷ Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, p. 452

⁴⁸ The 12 Step program has its origin in the formation of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) in the 1930s. The major text for A.A. is called "*Alcoholics Anonymous*", also known as "*The Big Book*".

11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood God, praying **only for knowledge of God's will for us** and the power to carry that out
12. Having had a **spiritual awakening** as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to other addicts, and to practice these principles in all our affairs

It seems likely that if Edwards had devised a 12 Step Program for alcoholics his would not have looked all that different—in fact, Step 1 (admitting one is powerless) is the very essence of his “theory of the mind” outlined above.

That Edwards’ “theory of the mind” resonates so strongly with what we know to be experientially true is surprising in a way—but in another way it is not. As has been the argument of this paper, Edwards was, in the words of Douglas J. Elwood, “perhaps more the product of his own direct experience than any other Christian thinker of his stature since Augustine.”⁴⁹ It should not surprise us that the human experience that created Edwards, and consumed his precise and relentless mind in study, is of the same type, in many ways, to our own; a scant two hundred and fifty years has not changed us much after all. Furthermore, recognition of this point should not only be unsurprising to us—it should alert us to the vast corpus of psychological thought that lays buried just underneath the tangled skeins of Edwards’ theological language and his particular philosophical context. The history of psychology in America runs much deeper than William James, and the psychological profession may find tracing the family tree back to Edwards an edifying experience.

Analogues and Anticipations

1) Counseling Theory

Edwards’ “theory of the mind” gives fuller form to the prevailing wisdom of counseling theory: that we are the choices we make.⁵⁰ Indeed, the psychological profession has been following a similar line of logic to Edwards’ since the foundation of the discipline. Wilhelm Wundt (a founding father of experimental psychology in the 1890’s) predicated his entire project on the belief in universal causation, and the possibility of total predictability given knowledge of psychic (read “moral necessity”) and physical (read “natural necessity”) conditions. Freedom theorists since then have generally prescribed to a holistic self-determinism: the idea that “freedom consists of decision independent of external constraints but in accordance with the inner premises, cognitions, motives, needs, and goals of the actor.”⁵¹ In accordance with this reasoning, psychological counselors advise their patients to examine their “inner premises.” Only when they can understand that the self-destructive choices they make are not anyone else’s fault (i.e. God, society, family, friends) can they realize that they are “free”

⁴⁹ Elwood, p. 150

⁵⁰ R. May, *Love and Will*, (New York: Norton, 1969)

⁵¹ Duffy Wilks, “A Historical Review of Counseling Theory Development,” from *Journal of Counseling & Development*, Summer 2003, Vol. 81, Issue 3, pp. 278-279

(assuming the absence of external constraints) in the most meaningful sense possible. Only then can the process of healing begin. Edwards would have agreed totally.

Furthermore, Freudian interpretations of freedom have proposed that “the goal of therapy is freedom for the client to fulfill a goal as meaning-giver,” and, within the cognitive-developmental tradition, the structuralist approach has proposed that “human development emerges as the living being intent on providing meaning to existence.”⁵² The Edwardsian “theory of the mind” speaks to both these contentions. In a sense, Edwards’ entire ministry was a prolonged therapy session. From the pulpit, and in his writing, Edwards preached that the only way persons could give their lives meaning was to renounce the possibility of self-transformation, even as he urged them to assume responsibility for their fundamentally rebellious hearts. Only then could they give meaning to their lives—because only then would they understand their true place in God’s creation. Only then could the saving grace of God reveal the true world to them: a causal web existing only in the mind of God.

2) Carl Jung and the *Unus Mundus*

Students of Carl Jung—one of the few psychologists to seriously engage the truth revealed in religion—in particular should find a great deal of interest in Edwards. The similarity in their thought springs from the fact that Jung too prescribed to an idealist metaphysic of sorts. Jung writes in “Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies”:

That the body can work on the psyche seems to be a truism, but strictly speaking all we know is that any bodily defect or illness also expresses itself psychically. Naturally this assumption only holds good if, contrary to the popular materialist view, the psyche is credited with an existence of its own. But materialism in its turn cannot explain how chemical changes can produce a psyche...it accords better with experience to suppose that living matter has a psychic aspect, and the psyche a physical aspect...In that case all reality would be grounded on an as yet unknown substrate possessing material and at the same time psychic qualities.⁵³

Jung referred to this “substrate of matter” as the *Unus Mundus* (One World). Essentially, Jung argued that psyche (or soul/mind) pervaded the entire universe and all human actions were caught in a causal web that directed us in ways that we did not know. Certainly, this is a similar argument to ones made by Edwards.

Furthermore, Edwards’ contention that the innate sinfulness of man was imputed to him by Adam’s sin passed down through the generations plays out in interesting ways when we think about it in terms of Jung. Jung, like Edwards, took an expansive view of individual identity: for Jung, a human being begins his/her journey toward self-hood millions of years before birth. Just as a man draws from his ancestry inherited physical traits, man is also “born with inherited possibilities of psychic functioning, which characterize him as human.” In this manner, we might consider the sin of Adam as equivalent to the sin of our entire human ancestry: for “each generation of men ‘adds an

⁵² Ibid. p. 280

⁵³ Carl Jung, “Flying Saucers: a Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies” CW 10, pars. 779-80, featured in *The Essential Jung*, Anthony Storr (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983)

infinitesimally small amount of variation and differentiation' to the accumulated ancestral deposit of human experience."⁵⁴

Finally, the Jungian concept of the archetype—symbols buried in the collective unconscious of humanity that represent fundamental aspects of the self—seems implied, if not framed as such, by Edwards. Jung believed that Christ “represents a concrete embodiment of the God-man relation inherent in the nature of men.” Essentially, Christ represents the bridge between a narrow definition of the self, to one that “presupposes an indefinite extension beyond the single personality.” In a way, it seems that Jung was talking about the difference between “self-love” and “love for Being in general”—to put it in Edwards’ terminology. Which is certainly what Christ represented for Edwards as well.⁵⁵

3) The Christian Model of Man as Sinner

Psychologists interested in understanding how theology gives us a model for understanding the nature of the human self should find in Edwards an invaluable resource.⁵⁶ Edwards, more so than any of his contemporaries, went to great pains to insure that his theology was not merely idle speculation; he presents us with a model for man’s relationship with the world that is consistent with man’s experience in it. His voice represents a counterweight to the opinion of psychologists like Sigmund Freud who argued that, far from being consistent with human experience, Christianity led to illusions about the self and the human situation.

Psychologists interested in habitual behavior should also find much of interest in Edwards model of man as sinner. In a fascinating article published in *The Journal of Religion*, Stephen A Wilson points to the possibility of reading into Edwards’ account of moral agency the possibility of a “freedom of limited dispositional enhancement in the future (FOLD).”⁵⁷ Wilson sees in Edwards the implication of a pre-volitional activity of the will that, although unable to effect action in the moment, is capable of effecting the disposition over time. Consequently, Wilson argues, people do have the power to affect their behavior through “sheer force of will”—but only in the future. This observation may help to abrogate the paradox Edwards presents when asking us to repent our arrogant ways, even as he tells us that we are powerless to change ourselves.

5) William James

Viewing James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experiences* (1902) in a comparative framework with Edwards’ Calvinist Psychology may be a fruitful endeavor. James, like

⁵⁴ Frank M. Bockus, “The Archetypal Self: Theological Values in Jung’s Psychology”, in *The Dialogue Between Theology and Psychology*, edited by Peter Homans, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 222-223

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 237

⁵⁶ See, “Theology and Self Understanding” by Fred Berthold Jr., in *The Dialogue Between Theology and Psychology*, edited by Peter Homans, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 11-32 for a discussion of how “the Christian model of man as sinner” can tell us psychologically useful things.

⁵⁷ Stephen A. Wilson, “The Possibility of a Habituation Model of Moral Development in Jonathan Edwards’ Conception of the Will’s Freedom,” *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 81, No. 1 (Jan. 2001), p. 49-77

Edwards, was convinced that religion was not only good—in the sense that the world would be a much poorer place without the genuine saint’s influence—it was also true to the human experience. Also, James believed that there was an unseen spiritual world that was only revealed through the religious experience. He even went so far as to posit that saintliness might well be the fulfillment of human existence.⁵⁸ These were all points of interest that Edwards elaborated on at length. However, it is James’ work that is considered to be the classic, and the bestseller, of the psychology of religion. This is so for obvious reasons: James participated in founding the discipline of psychology, and his prose is infinitely more accessible. But interested parties may find much of interest in Edwards’ analysis of religious experience none-the-less.

Conclusion

The foregoing “analogues and anticipations” section only serves to suggest the breadth of thought provoking psychological fodder that lies waiting in the tomes of Jonathan Edwards’ works. They are “analogues” in the sense that each point sketched demonstrates an analogous line of thought held by a person conventionally included in the history of psychology. And they are “anticipations” because it is not being suggested here that a straight line can be drawn from Edwards to later psychological thought (although, one cannot rule out the possibility that a determined researcher may be able to demonstrate just that). The confluence and divergence of different streams of philosophical thought (in which psychology had long been subsumed) form a veritable Gordian knot: we can follow a particular thread into the tangle, but it is extremely difficult to determine where, or even if, it comes out. But we can still say that this thread is of the same texture and composed of the same fiber as another; thus we can say that Edwards’ thought anticipated psychological thought that followed.

Furthermore, the lack of a definitive intellectual history that would link Edwardsian psychology with a William James or a Wundt should not deter us from finding value in Edwards’ psychological thought. As Nietzsche, a philosopher Edwards would most definitely not have been friendly with, pointed out:

That individual philosophical concepts are not anything capricious or autonomously evolving, but grow up in connection and relationship with each other; that, however suddenly and arbitrarily they seem to appear in the history of thought, they never-the-less belong just as much to a system as all the members of the fauna of a continent—is betrayed in the end also by the fact that the most diverse philosophers keep filling in a definite fundamental scheme of possible philosophies. Under an invisible spell, they always revolve once more in the same orbit... Their thinking is, in fact, far less a discovery than a recognition, a remembering, a return and a homecoming to a remote, primordial, and inclusive household of the soul, out of which those concepts grew originally: philosophizing is to this extent a kind of atavism of the highest order.⁵⁹

The advantage of studying Edwards for an American psychologist lies in the fact that the venture in Edwards’ case is doubly atavistic. Not only in the sense Nietzsche indicates above—but also in the sense that Edwards occupies a special place in a distinctly American heritage. The Puritan influences active in formulating a distinctive American

⁵⁸ G. William Barnard, “Mystical Assessments”, in *William James and the Varieties of Religious Experience*, edited by Jeremy Carrette, (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 133-145

⁵⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, translated by Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 27

character, intellect, and government have all been extensively catalogued; *their* story is commonly understood as being *our* story as well. But, at the same time we are confronted with a fundamental feeling of alien-ness when looking back at them: indeed it has often been remarked that not even in our imagination can we really understand what it was like to live the life of a Puritan, to think the thoughts he thought, to feel what he felt, and to do what he did. But surely we *can* imagine at least—and that is what Edwards allows us to do. By way of understanding Puritan psychology through Edwards, we may well come to a better understanding of our own. And, in the final analysis, we may well conclude that 18th-century America's greatest theologian was also its greatest psychologist.