

# Jonathan Edwards Biographies

---

## “Jonathan Edwards: The First Modern American” Perry Miller \*

The truth is, Edwards was infinitely more than a theologian. He was one of America’s five or six major artists, who happened to work with ideas instead of with poems or novels. He was much more a psychologist and a poet than a logician, and though he devoted his genius to topics derived from the body of divinity — the will, virtue, sin — he treated them in the manner of the very finest speculators, in the manner of Augustine, Aquinas, and Pascal, as problems not of dogma but of life. Furthermore, the conditions under which he labored, in pioneer America, make his achievement the more remarkable, and his failures the more poignant, not as an episode in the history of creeds and systems, but as a prefiguration of the artist in America. He is the child of genius in this civilization; though he met the forces of our society in their infancy, when they had not yet enlarged into the complexity we now endure, he called them by their names, and pronounced as one foreseeing their tendencies. If the student penetrates behind the technical language, he discovers an intelligence which, as much as Emerson’s, Melville’s, or Mark Twain’s, is both an index of American society and a comment upon it.

If I read him correctly — though Edwards remains, as he was even to himself, an enigma — he repays study because, while he speaks from a primitive religious conception which often seems hopelessly out of touch with even his own day, yet at the same time he speaks from an insight into science and psychology so much ahead of his time that our own can hardly be said to have caught up with him. Though he had followers, he was not the sort of artist who really can found a “school.” He is unique, an aboriginal and monolithic power, with nothing of that humanity which opens every heart to Franklin; but he is a reminder that, although our civilization has chosen to wander in the more genial meadows to which Franklin beckoned it, there come periods, either through disaster or through self-knowledge, when applied science and Benjamin Franklin’s *The Way to Wealth* seem not a sufficient philosophy of national life. . .

He always exalted experience over reason. He could remember being so young that he thought two objects, one twice as far off as the other, were the same distance away, one above the other; his senses, he reflected, made the same representation of them then as now, and in themselves the senses do not deceive: “The only difference is in *experience*.” In his latest thinking he

condemned as nonsensical all views that regard reason as a rule superior to experience, that build upon “what our reason would lead us to suppose without, or before experience, . . . even in those matters that afterwards are tried by experience, and wherein experience shews things in a different light from what our reason suggested without experience.” The riddle of Edwards is that this (as his townsmen came to believe) monstrously intransigent man scorned the doctrinaire: “History, observation, and experience, are the things which must determine the question.”

In these respects Edwards must be called, as this study will call him, an empiricist. This is not to say, however, that Edwards held tentative hypotheses subject to constant alteration by further experiment. Critics filled with the spirit of modern positivism rashly declare that because at the age of twelve Edwards wrote a masterpiece of microscopic observation upon a species of flying spider, and as an undergraduate put down a series of “Notes on Science” which exhibit a phenomenal mastery of Newton, he was a potential scientist thwarted by his environment and forced into the uncongenial wastes of theology. The precocious piece on the spider does indeed indicate, as his nineteenth-century biographer put it, “a fondness, minutely and critically to investigate the works of nature”; but Edwards went to nature and experience, not in search of the possible, but of the given, of that which cannot be controverted, of that to which reason has access only through perception and pain, that of which logic is the servant and from which dialectic receives its premises. “And thus it is we actually determine, that experience is so good and sure a medium of proof.” . . .

Not only had Jonathan Edwards’ converse, unlike that of even more erudite contemporaries, included Locke’s *Essay*, but the reading of it had been the central and decisive event in his intellectual life. He discovered it in 1717 when still at Wethersfield, two years after the essay on spiders, and read it with far more pleasure “than the most greedy miser finds, when gathering up handfuls of silver and gold, from some newly discovered treasure.” History cannot scrape together out of all America as early as 1717 more than a handful of men who had read the *Essay*, and none with any such realization that the “new way of thinking by ideas” would determine the intellectual career of the eighteenth century. The boy of fourteen grasped in a flash what was to take the free and catholic students of Professor Wigglesworth thirty or forty years to comprehend, that Locke was the master-spirit of the age, and that the *Essay* made everything then being offered at Harvard or Yale as philosophy, psychology, and rhetoric so obsolete that it could no longer be taken seriously.

What prepared Edwards for the insight? At first view nothing in the history of thought is more incongruous than the instinctive seizure by this backwoods adolescent upon the doctrine that emerged from the sophisticated

---

\* Miller, Perry. *Jonathan Edwards*. New York: William Sloan Associates, 1949.

entourage of the first Earl of Shaftesbury, and yet one can, I believe, make out the logic of it. The boy had walked in his father's pasture, looking upon the sky and clouds until "the appearance of every thing was altered" and "there seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet, cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost every thing"; he used to sit and view the moon, "singing forth, with a low voice, my contemplations of the Creator." His mind became "greatly fixed on divine things; almost perpetually in the contemplation of them," until his inability to express what he felt became a torturing clog and a burden: "The inward ardour of my soul, seemed to be hindered and pent up, and could not freely flame out as it would." Then he read Locke, and the divine strategy was revealed to him. God's way, Locke made clear, is indirection, which is the only way, because speaking the unspeakable is impossible; God works through the concrete and the specific, and the mind (Edwards would add, the regenerate mind) must know enough "to stop when it is at the utmost extent of its tether." The way to cope with the problem was not to raise questions and multiply disputes, as did M.A. candidates in the public "commonplacings" by which they qualified themselves to be ministers in New England, but "to take a survey of our own understandings, examine our own powers, and see to what things they were adapted." Otherwise, we shall either come to a "perfect scepticism" or else "let loose our thoughts in the vast ocean of Being; as if all that boundless extent were the natural and undoubted possession of our understandings, wherein there was nothing exempt from its decisions, or that escaped its comprehension."

For a young man on the verge of drowning in the vast ocean of Being, the disclosure of "this historical, plain method," which gave at last a full account of the ways whereby our understandings attain their notions and which prescribed tests of the certainty of knowledge, was not only a rescue, it was a directive for living. It saved him from the fire of his own intensity, or from the scepticism which in moments of depression seemed the only alternative, by teaching him that the one legitimate field of both speculation and worship is the content of the human mind. Out of his study of Locke, remote as such a result was from Locke's aim of bringing philosophy "into well-bred company and polite conversation," Edwards was able to solve his problem, and (as he believed) the problem of American culture, by achieving a permanent and abiding sense "how meet and suitable it was that God should govern the world, and order all things according to his own pleasure."

From the beginning Puritan education was organized into a hierarchy of the liberal arts culminating in a blueprint of creation, taught as the crowning subject in the curriculum and called "technologia," which was supposed to be an organon of all the arts and was therefore an exhaustive chart of the order by which God did govern the world. Therein were laid out all things, concepts, relations, propositions, principles, as in a graph which, with endless branches and subdivisions and "dichotomies," looked like a genealogist's diagram of

some gigantic family tree. At the moment he read Locke, Edwards was learning technologia from Elisha Williams. Locke showed him that technologia was "some of the rubbish that lies in the way of knowledge," a "learned but frivolous use of uncouth, affected, or unintelligible terms" that had to be cleared away before the "master-builders" — Locke mentioned specifically Boyle, Sydenham, Huygens, "and the incomparable Mr. Newton," names that echoed ominously in the air of Wethersfield — might get on with the proper business of philosophy, "which is nothing but the true knowledge of things."

The elaborate structure of technologia, which was taught not as a knowledge of things but of "arguments," collapsed in Edwards' mind like a house of cards as he learned from Locke that men can acquire the materials of reason and knowledge solely from (Locke printed it in capitals) "EXPERIENCE." Men have to deal with things, but not with things as they lie in the divine mind or float in the ocean of being, but simply as they are registered on the human brain. When perceived by the mind, a thing is, to speak accurately, no longer just a dead thing by itself, but the mind's "idea" of it. An idea, said Locke, is "the *object* of the understanding when a man thinks." This is, in fact, only common sense, but the point is that one does not need an elaborate scholastic ritual to grasp the definition of ideas: "every one is conscious of them in himself." Yet just that simplicity of the first principle was what delivered Edwards from the maze of technologia a generation in advance of his fellows. Thenceforth Edwards' fundamental premise was Locke's, the assurance that what the mind knows is no more than its ideas, and consequently (Locke again resorted to capitals) that "this great source of most of the ideas we have, depending wholly upon our senses, and derived by them to the understanding, I call SENSATION."

Edwards read this work with ecstasy, the burden of an insupportable weight lifted with every page. No longer, he saw, need mankind struggle through life on the supposition that certain innate concepts were implanted in them which did not originate out of the world about them, which were supposed to be part of the image of God and therefore to exert absolute authority in advance of any experience or any actual problem. Locke made it evident that to believe in such an imperative was to submit to something so out of kilter that it was bound to become an excuse for self-indulgence. Hence Edwards' thought cohered firmly about the basic certainty that God does not impart ideas or obligations outside sense experience. He does not rend the fabric of nature or break the connection between experience and behavior. The universe is all of a piece, and in it God works upon man through the daily shock of sensation, which (here Locke resorted to italics) "*is such an impression or motion made in some part of the body, as produces some perception in the understanding*"

The best of it was, for Edwards, that Locke accounted for, even while destroying, such monstrosities as technologia: those sublime constructions, "which tower above the clouds, and reach as high as heaven itself," all take their

rise from (and so can be resolved back into) the lowly senses; “in all that great extent wherein the mind wanders, in those remote speculations it may seem to be elevated with, it stirs not one jot beyond those ideas which *sense* or *reflection* have offered for its contemplation.” Therefore Edwards was enabled to understand the predicament of New England civilization: if religion remained bound to an antiquated metaphysic, false philosophy would drag theology deeper into the morass. The free and catholic spirit, confessing by its scorn of cramming principles down another mans throat that it had no principles to cram, was setting up an ideal of candor attached to no particular scheme, a position which was as great an evasion of sensation as the rubbish of technologia. Here was the secret of that decline of piety which all the clergy lamented, but which none was able to arrest.

Furthermore, did not Locke, by supplying the diagnosis, also point the way to rectification: “As the bodies that surround us do diversely affect our organs, the mind is forced to receive the impressions; and cannot avoid the perception of those ideas that are annexed to them.” If the way to make living impressions on the minds of men is through the senses, did it not follow that a Christian oratory which would put aside all those vague and insignificant forms of speech, all those abuses of language that have passed for science, which with the help of Locke would “break in upon the sanctuary of vanity and ignorance,” which would use words as God uses objects, to force sensations and the ideas annexed to them into mens minds through the only channel ideas can be carried to them, through the senses — would such an oratory not force upon New England the awakening that three generations of prophets had called for in vain? It was central to Locke’s analysis that the mind, having no innate faculties of its own, is so dependent upon the outer world that it is wholly passive in receiving impressions, “and whether or no it will have these beginnings, and as it were materials of knowledge, is not in its own power.”

Critics of Locke, even in his own day and more ardently in the nineteenth century, have called his doctrine of “passivity” the fatal weakness of empirical psychology; the mind of Edwards, however, was trained by the doctrine of New England, in which it had always been held that man is passive in the reception of grace and that he is bound to sin if he tries to earn salvation by his own efforts or on his own terms. Was it not precisely here that the new metaphysics and the old theology, the modern psychology and the ancient regeneration, came together in an exhilarating union? The whole reach of the vision unfolded before Edwards as he read Locke’s innocent observation that simple ideas, “when offered to the mind, the understanding can no more refuse to have, nor alter when they are imprinted, nor blot them out and make new ones itself, than a mirror can refuse, alter, or obliterate the images or ideas which the objects set before it do therein produce.” The empirical passivity became for Edwards, in the context of eighteenth-century New England, not an invitation to lethargy, but a program of action. . . .

Edwards could hold in his hands the actual *Principia* and *Opticks* Newton himself took down from his shelves and gave to Dummer for a gift to the new college in the wilderness. (In 1723 Harvard owned the *Opticks* but no *Principia*.) We know that Samuel Johnson read this *Principia* and vainly tried to teach himself enough mathematics to understand it. Edwards never understood fluxions or other higher mathematics, but to the extent that a man can read Newton without such proficiency, he read him, and though like most admirers he accepted the “sublime geometry” on Newton’s say-so, he appreciated the more literary “Scholia” with a profundity not to be rivaled in America until the great John Winthrop took over the Hollis professorship as successor to Greenwood in 1738, or until a printer in Philadelphia succeeded in keeping his shop until it kept him in sufficient leisure to allow time for reading. Consequently, when we go behind Edwards’ early publications to find the hidden meanings, we discover in the “Notes” not one key but two, a dual series of reflections, often intermingled but not yet synthesized. The one proceeds out of Locke and becomes what posterity has called his “idealism”; the other begins with Newton and becomes what has been less widely appreciated, his naturalism. In his mind there was an equilibrium, more or less stable, of the two, which is the background of his cabalistic dichotomy, set up in the Boston lecture as though it were too apparent to need explaining; if his proposition about the “inherent good” requires for full comprehension a knowledge of Locke, his assertion of the “objective good” demands an equally rigorous study of Newton.

Edwards would not compartmentalize his thinking. He is the last great American, perhaps the last European, for whom there could be no warfare between religion and science, or between ethics and nature. He was incapable of accepting Christianity and physics on separate premises. His mind was so constituted — call it courage or call it naivete — that he went directly to the issues of his age, defined them, and asserted the historic Protestant doctrine in full cognizance of the latest disclosures in both psychology and natural science. That the psychology he accepted was an oversimplified sensationalism, and that his science was unaware of evolution and relativity, should not obscure the fact that in both quarters he dealt with the primary intellectual achievements of modernism, with the assumptions upon which our psychology and physics still prosper: that man is conditioned and that the universe is uniform law. The importance of Edwards — I cannot insist too strongly — lies not in his answers, which often are pathetic testimonies to his lack of sophistication or to the meagerness of his resources, but in his inspired definitions. Locke is, after all, the father of modern psychology, and Newton is the fountainhead of our physics; their American student, aided by remoteness, by technological innocence, and undoubtedly by his arrogance, asked in all cogency why, if the human organism is a protoplasm molded by environment, and if its environment is a system of unalterable operations, need mankind any longer

agonize, as they had for seventeen hundred years, over the burden of sin? By defining the meaning of terms derived from Locke and Newton in the light of this question, Edwards established certain readings so profound that only from the perspective of today can they be fully appreciated.

“The whole burden of philosophy,” said Newton, “seems to consist in this — from the phenomena of motions to investigate the forces of nature, and then from these forces to demonstrate the other phenomena.” Conceiving the universe as motion — which, unlike the concepts hitherto taught in New England, such as substance, form, and accident, could be expressed in mathematical formulae — Newton arrived at such an earth-shaking discovery as this: “If you press a stone with your finger, the finger is also pressed by the stone.” Of course, no farmer in Connecticut needed to be told, “If a horse draws a stone tied to a rope, the horse (if I may say so) will be equally drawn back towards the stone.” But every farmer was told, and professed to believe, what Luther had put succinctly over a century before the *Principia*: “For though you were nothing but good works from the sole of your foot to the crown of your head, yet you would not be righteous, nor worship God, nor fulfill the First Commandment, since God cannot be worshipped unless you ascribe to Him the glory of truthfulness and of all goodness, which is due Him.” By the logic of that other science, called divinity or theology, upon which New England was founded, the best of deeds were “insensate things,” which in themselves reflect no slightest glory upon the Creator. “Faith alone is the righteousness of a Christian man.” If a man has faith, according to Luther — and after him Calvin and the Puritans — he “is free from all things and over all things.”

For a century Yankees had believed this, but they had not been free from and over such things as the stones in their pastures, which broke both their own and their horses’ backs. In the old-fashioned physics a stone was a concatenation of form and substance, with a final cause, and so its weight could be “improved” in theology as a trial laid upon man in punishment of his sin; but if now the obstinacy of the resisting body was an inherent mathematical product of its density and its bulk, if it lawfully possessed an inertia of its own which man must comprehend by the analogy of muscular effort, how could a man struggling with a rock in his field become persuaded that by faith he might be “free” of it? A more logical conclusion was that since weight is a natural force, the profitable method of freeing himself from it was by the law of levers, by a better breed of horses, but not by moralizing that the presumption of good works means the instant loss of faith and its benefits. There was — as Edwards perceived the situation — an organic connection between Newtons laws of motion and that law of salvation by faith which Calvin had made, once and for all, “the principal hinge by which religion is supported.”

Luther, Calvin, and the founders of New England frequently utilized the physics of their day, which was still scholastic, for illustration or

confirmation of their doctrines, but they never dreamed of resting the case for Protestantism upon the laws of nature. Edwards saw in a glance that no theology would any longer survive unless it could be integrated with the *Principia*. Newton claimed that in so far as we can learn the first cause from natural philosophy, “so far our Duty towards Him, as well as towards one another, will appear to us by the Light of Nature.” This was not a boast, it was a threat. The *Principia* meant that henceforth there was to be no intelligible order apart from the actual. Although Newton discreetly left unanswered certain basic queries, he did show beyond question that the method of inquiry, in theology no less than in science, must be conformed to physical reality: “For Nature is pleased with simplicity, and affects not the pomp of superfluous causes.”

In 1734 Edwards preached a series of sermons on justification by faith, the “principal hinge” of Protestantism; he reworked them into a sustained tract which he published in 1738. It was the most elaborate intellectual production he had yet attempted, and it figures in his development — or rather in the public exhibition of the development he had already undergone — as the first effort in American history to coordinate with the doctrine of Puritan revelation the new concept of science, in which such a superfluity of causes as had been the stock-in-trade of Edwards’ predecessors became an affectation of pomp. He was resolved to prove that justification must in all simplicity be merged with the order of causality, and that if salvation was to be called an effect, of which faith was in some sense the cause, then the sequence must be formulated anew in language compatible with Newton’s. . . .

He maneuvered a revolt by substituting for seventeenth-century legalisms the brute language of eighteenth-century physics. He cast off habits of mind formed in feudalism, and entered abruptly into modernity, where facts rather than prescriptive rights and charters were henceforth to be the arbiters of human affairs. If the experience of regeneration is real, then “what is real in the union between Christ and his people, is the foundation of what is legal.” The language of revolution in this undramatic sentence is difficult to catch across the centuries, but taken in the context of the 1730’s it is as decisive, and as fundamental, as that of the more historic declarations. In 1734 Edwards was applying to theology a critique which assumed that theology should derive from experience and not from logic or from convention. His society, having slipped into a way of calling faith the condition of a covenant, had made the gratuitous assumption that faith was therefore the actual producer of the effect. It was heedlessly supposing that faith is the cause of salvation, and had insensibly come to assume that a man’s belief worked his spiritual character exactly as by his physical exertion he shoved a stone out of a meadow. The people had succumbed to a metaphor, and had taken a shallow analogy for a scientific fact. Hence religion, which can thrive only upon realities, was fallen into decay.

Thus without openly proclaiming a revolution, Edwards effectively staged one. The object of his attack was what his society had hitherto assumed to be the relation of cause to effect, on which assumption it was constructed. If a ball that strikes another is called the cause of motion in the other, it then works the effect and determines the consequences; if, however, the first can be said only to transmit force to the second, it is but the first in a series of events determined by a law higher than itself. Puritanism all unwittingly had made the fatal mistake — it has proved equally disastrous for other cultures — of supposing that an event in one realm can cause effects in a totally other realm, that a man's act of belief can oblige the will of God. It had tried to make the transcendent conform to the finite, and pretended that it had succeeded. Edwards drew upon his study of Newton for a contradictory conception: "There is a difference between being justified by a thing, and that thing universally, and necessarily, and inseparably attending or going with justification." He went to physics for a cause that does not bind the effect by producing it; he found in the new science (few besides Newton himself understood that this was the hidden meaning of the *Principia*) the concept of an antecedent to a subsequent, in which the subsequent, when it does come to pass, proves to be whatever it is by itself and in itself, without determination by the precedent.

He never bewildered his auditors by expounding scientific analogies beyond their grasp, but he quietly took into the realm of theology the principles he had learned — or believed were obvious — in his inspired reading of Newton. Obviously his imagination had taken fire from such remarks of Newton's as, "It is not to be conceived that mere mechanical causes could give birth to so many regular motions." Thousands of Newtonians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries took this to mean only that "God" created the universe; Edwards took it to mean that cause in the realm of mechanics is merely a sequence of phenomena, with the inner connection of cause and effect still mysterious and terrifying. He interpreted the sequence of belief and regeneration by the same insight. His people, of course, were still ignorant of the "Notes on the Mind." Had they been permitted to take them from his desk, they might have comprehended how, in his view, the old Aristotelian array of causes — final, formal, and material—had been dissolved before the triumph of the now solitary efficient cause. Hence they might have understood that for him the secret of nature was no longer that an efficient cause of itself works such and such an effect, but is to be defined as "that after or upon the existence of which, or the existence of it after such a manner, the existence of another thing follows." All effects must therefore have their causes, but no effect is a "result" of what has gone before it.

The metaphysics of this idea were profound, but Edwards' statement is so enigmatic that we may rightly doubt whether many good burghers in Northampton had any notion what he was talking about. Still, the import was

clear: a once harsh doctrine, which for over a century had been progressively rendered harmless and comfortable, was once more harsh. . . .

Edwards scientifically, deliberately, committed Puritanism, which had been a fervent rationalism of the covenant, to a pure passion of the senses, and the terror he imparted was the terror of modern man, the terror of insecurity. He overthrew the kind of religious philosophy that had dominated Western Europe since the fall of Rome, the system wherein there was always — whether in terms of the City of God, or of the Mass and absolution, or of final causes and substantial forms, or, at the last, in terms of the Puritan covenant — an ascertainable basis for human safety. Now there was none:

Unconverted men walk over the pit of hell on a rotten covering, and there are innumerable places in this covering so weak that they will not bear their weight, and these places are not seen. The arrows of death fly unseen at noonday; the sharpest sight cannot discern them.

In the moment of triumph, Edwards threw off disguises and exposed the secret long nurtured; the last remnant of scholasticism was discarded, and God was no longer bound by any promise, whether of metaphysics or of law. Edwards brought mankind, as Protestantism must always bring them, without mitigation, protection, or indulgence, face to face with a cosmos fundamentally inhuman: "There are no means within reach that can be any security to them." They are without any refuge, and "all that preserves them every moment is the mere arbitrary will, and uncovenanted, unobliged forbearance of an incensed God." Edwards' preaching was America's sudden leap into modernity.

The modern student must, if he wishes to comprehend, free himself of certain ultra modern prejudices. Even among the devout, torments are generally considered, in Edwards' word, "bugbears." Were Edwards only a shouting evangelist who drummed up hysteria with hell- fire and brimstone, he would pertain to social history along with Asbury and Peter Cartwright, but not to literature and not to philosophy. By supplying a vehicle which ignorance and crudity soon adopted, Edwards wrought incalculable harm, though we must remember that the main current of American revivalism flows from Whitefield and the Methodists rather than from him, and that among revivalists he is a peculiar figure. Edwards was primarily concerned with the problem of communication. By the time of Channing, Emerson, and Horace Bushnell, the terms of this problem were so different from those of the early eighteenth century that they could not understand him; today, the terms forced upon us, albeit more complex, are essentially those that confronted him: a behavioristic psychology and a universe of a-moral forces. Far from being street- corner evangelism, Edwards' sermons are immense and concentrated efforts to get across, in the simplest language, the meaning of the religious life, of the life of consciousness, after physics has reduced nature to a series of irreversible

equations, after analysis of the mind has reduced intelligence to sensory conditioning. They are, we may say, explorations of the meaning of meaning.

Not that they are systematic expositions. The terms of art are concealed, and they attempt to solve the problem not by metaphysics but by action. Edwards strove to work so upon his listeners that in the act of comprehension they could not help knowing the answer. They are direct, frontal attacks upon epistemological doubt. Locke condemned enthusiasm for holding ideas without regard to objective fact, and pled for their control by reason; yet he had to confess that by his philosophy no ideas in the mind could ever be “exactly the images and resemblances of something inherent in the subject.” How, then, can an idea be called true? How can a perception have moral or passionate value if the sequence of causes is implacably fixed without regard to values? In parrying these questions, Locke hit upon a significant analogy: sensations bear no more likeness to things existing without us “than the names that stand for them are the likeness of our ideas, which yet upon hearing they are apt to excite in us.” To his surprise, Locke stumbled upon the discovery that the problem of language is one with the problem of knowledge. Thereupon, further embarrassing questions disclosed themselves: how can language be anything but the chance accumulation of conditioned reflexes? How, in a scientific cosmos, can words be used to regenerate or to unite a society? Edwards’ sermons must be read as an effort to meet these questions head-on. They are experimental wrestlings with the two gigantic issues of modern philosophy: of the link between the objective and the subjective; and of semantics itself — of how words can be manipulated so that, despite their radical unlikeness to concepts, they will convey trustworthy ideas.

Of course, Edwards never doubted that a hell exists to which sinners go after death, but that consideration was a footnote. . . .

If a sermon was to work an effect, it had to impart the sensible idea in all immediacy; in the new psychology, it must become, not a travelers report nor an astrologer’s prediction, but an actual descent into hell.

By this road Edwards led New England toward the semantic problem that, in one form or another, challenged everyone around the beginning of the century, and still challenges us. Locke himself only belatedly became aware that it existed, and midway through the *Essay* had to turn aside from his argument to spend Book III on “Words.” At first the answer seemed to him simple enough: language in the sensational psychology is wholly artificial; in themselves words are merely noises, and either “pain” or “bread” may signify the staff of life, depending on the convention established in the society. There is absolutely no “natural connexion” between a particular sound and a specific thing; a word has meaning, conveys an idea, only “by a perfect voluntary imposition.” Imposition is an act of will, of the corporate will, which is often capricious and subject to fashion. A word is merely “annexed” to reality.

But precisely here difficulties began to accumulate. In the hypothetical state of nature, words might stand for the signs of basic realities, but as society grew more complex, the words would become separated from their objects and lead a life of their own. This was psychologically explicable: the tongue can say the word when no idea is in the mind; the mind itself can take the idea for granted and retain the word after the perception is utterly forgotten. Instead of being annexed to an object, the word itself becomes an object, a pallid object as compared with the thing it stands for, but the only object the mind any longer knows. Children and whole societies — New England for one — can learn the words before they have the experience, and their knowing the words will preclude the experience; thus they drag on for generations, like virgins reading of love in romances, without ever knowing the meanings. The leadership of New England would never arouse virgin souls from formality until it jolted them into a new awareness — a fresh perception — of the primordial oneness of word and idea. Otherwise the orators would induce an ecstasy which is, at best, verbal, which leaves the emotions untouched and gives the listener no more than a pattern of words — sarcasms, insults, derisions — in which the fitting of phrase to phrase proves to be only meticulousness, from which all ulterior reference has vanished. They would scratch men’s ears, but never scare their hearts.

By his dissertation on language, Locke had no intention of assisting theologians; instead, he hoped to silence them once and for all. If he could prove that the controversies “which have so laid waste the intellectual world” were nothing but ill-use of words, mere haggling about “mixed modes” (which are not imprints of real things but constructions “put together in the mind, independent from any original patterns in nature”), he could call a halt to “wrangling, without improvement or information.” Edwards saw that Locke’s satire on the language of theologians — “the voluntary and unsteady signs of their own ideas” — applied to his colleagues, but his admiration for Locke was thereby increased, and Locke was still “a certain great man” despite his hostility to Calvinism because he showed Edwards, if no one else, that New England’s problem was primarily linguistic. Edwards read more deeply into Locke than did Locke himself; he put the substance of his penetration into an early resolution: “To extricate all questions from least confusion or ambiguity of words, so that the ideas shall be left naked.” Again, the resolution was concealed in the performance, but occasionally he showed his hand: “Sounds and letters are external things,” he let slip, “that are the objects of the external senses of seeing and hearing.” Hence Edwards’ pulpit oratory was a consuming effort to make sounds become objects, to control and discipline his utterance so that words would immediately be registered on the senses not as noises but as ideas. To use the term in its technical rather than its debased sense, his was truly “sensational” preaching, which wrought an overwhelming effect by extraordinary simplicity.

The problem given him by New England society was to make words once more represent a reality other than themselves, but he formulated it out of Locke: if language is inherently conventional, and if in a particular culture it has become wholly conventionalized, how can one employ a convention to shatter conventionality? It could be done only by freeing language from stale associations, by forcing words so to function in the chain of natural causes that out of the shock upon the senses would come of the idea. Only then could the meaning of meanings be carried to the heart of listeners. Committed by Locke to an environmentalism in which not the nature of the shock but the nature of the recipient determined the kind of effect, Edwards further committed himself to administering the kind of shock that would transform the recipient, by psychological processes, into the kind of person who would absorb the shock in only one way. He was emboldened to this improvement upon his master by Locke's hint that subjective perception is true in so far as it is also perception of reality. The source of human error is not the senses, which never deceive, but an inability or a wanton refusal to comprehend the evidence of the senses. Preaching should address the real culprit: "I am not afraid to tell sinners, that are most sensible of their misery, that their case is indeed miserable as they think it to be, and a thousand times more so; for this is the truth." . . .

Gradually taking shape in this analysis was a radically new definition of the religious man, not as right-thinking, but as "influenced by some affection, either love or hatred, desire, hope, fear." Multitudes may hear the word, none will be altered except those that are affected; good commentaries and rhetorically perfect essays will give men speculative understanding, but make no real impression: "God hath appointed a particular and lively application of his word to men in the preaching of it, as a fit means to affect sinners with the importance of the things of religion, and their own misery, and necessity of a remedy, and the glory and sufficiency of a remedy provided." The parting between heaven and hell is located not in the regions of the sky or under the earth, not even in the Last Judgment, but in the human perception; the function of art is to make the distinction unmistakable. This requires of the artist a stupendous assertion of will: he must *make* words convey the idea of heaven, he must *force* them to give the idea of hell.

The great moments in Edwards' apocalyptic sermons are such efforts of will. Let us consider another passage, as successful as any in the Enfield sermon, this time without the image of the spider:

We can conceive but little of the matter: we cannot conceive what that sinking of the soul in such a case is. But to help your conception, imagine yourself to be cast into a fiery oven, all of a glowing heat, or into the midst of a glowing brick-kiln, or of a great furnace, where your pain would be as much greater than that occasioned by accidentally touching a coal of fire, as the heat is greater. Imagine also that your body were to lie there for a quarter

of an hour, full of fire, as full within and without as a bright coal of fire, all the while full of quick sense; what horror would you feel at the entrance of such a furnace! And how long would that quarter of an hour seem to you! If it were to be measured by a glass, how long would the glass seem to be running! And after you had endured it for one minute, how overbearing would it be to you to think that you had it to endure the other fourteen!

But what would be the effect on your soul, if you knew you must lie there enduring that torment to the full for twenty-four hours! And how much greater would be the effect, if you knew you must endure it for a whole year; and how vastly greater still, if you knew you must endure it for a thousand years! O then, how would your heart sink, if you thought, if you knew, that you must bear it forever and ever! That there would be no end! That after millions of millions of ages, your torment would be no nearer to an end, than ever it was; and that you never, never should be delivered!

The achievement of this passage is the nakedness of the idea. There is no figure of speech (the blunt command to imagine yourself in a brick-kiln is literally the thing, not a simile or a metaphor), nothing pejorative; it is as bare as experience itself, as it would be to the sense that suffers. It is, I take it, what Hermann Broch calls the style of old age, a phrase applicable to Edwards' earliest as to his latest writing, a style reduced to a few prime concepts, that relies on the syntax: the artist who has reached this point, says Broch, is beyond art, "his attitude approximates that of the scientist with whom he shares the concern for expressing the universe." When critics objected that the shrieks and exclamations of his auditors were not signs of the presence of the spirit, Edwards replied from the lofty height of his linguistic science: "Cryings out, ... as I have seen them from time to time, is as much an evidence to me, of the general cause it proceeds from, as language: I have learned the meaning of it, the same way that persons learn the meaning of language, viz., by use and experience." . . .

In the summer of 1741 Edwards was at the height of his career and influence. Every house in town was full of outcries, faintings, and convulsions; but if there was distress, there was also admiration and joy. He could recite the transformations: young people forsaking frolicking, impure language, and lewd songs; reform in dress and avoidance of taverns; beaux and fine ladies become serious and mortified; throughout New England the Bible in esteem, the Lord's day observed, differences reconciled and faults confessed; old grudges and long-continued breaches made up in entire amity. In Northampton, party spirit so far ceased that town meetings were no longer figured by unchristian heats, and, almost too amazing to relate, they came to an agreement about the common lands! If more evidence were needed, the divine power had supported many hearts under great trials, the death of children and extreme pain of body; and finally, proof beyond all proof, under its influence some "have, in such a calm,

bright and joyful frame of mind, been carried through the valley of the shadow of death." This indubitably was the work of a general, not of a particular cause, not of mechanics but of reality. "That which is lovely in itself, is lovely when it appears." Such effects could not be wrought by words, but only by ideas; these were not mass hysterias or mob frenzies, but universal subjective conformations, among an entire people, to the objective fact. They were inviolable sequences arising out of a sense of newness and freshness. They were not enthusiasm. If any still doubted — all that winter and spring there was no sign of life from Charles Chauncy — let them face the facts. This was the day of God's visitation. "Experience shows it." . . .

Western culture has never been uncomfortable when living with the out- and-out supernatural: the mystery of the Mass is frankly mysterious; if grace is an influx of spirit, the people pray for grace as parched counties pray for rain. On the other hand, when conversion is defined as a rational persuasion, those who have the education and the wit manage it, and the others bow to a superiority they cannot understand. But Edwards wove the supernatural into the natural, the rational into the emotional, and thus made the mystery so nearly comprehensible that it became terrifying. He called it a form of perception, and from his description everybody would seem to be capable of it — except that not everybody is. His supernaturalism was naturalized, or if you will, he supernaturalized nature, and introduced the divine element into the world, not as a substance or a quantity, not as a compound of already existing things or an addition to them, but as "what some metaphysicians call a new simple idea."

He wanted desperately to conceal the terms of art, and not bewilder simple people by parading great names like Newton and Locke; but more desperately he needed a vocabulary, and so published grace as a simple idea, an irreducible pellet of experience which has no tangible being and yet is the principle of the organization of being, as light is an organization of color and sweetness an organization of honeys. This new principle, "in a mind, that is a perceiving, thinking conscious thing," being a sensation, is at once a perception, and so "a principle of a new kind of perception or spiritual sensation," without which "all other principles of perception, and all our faculties are useless and vain." This evanescent, universally accessible, and yet seldom seized-upon power — in Edwards' packed statement, it is practically one with consciousness aware of the conscious — he substituted for that which Christianity had hitherto treated as an eternal decree within the economy of the Godhead.

No matter how much he called the new simple idea supernatural, the suspicion then and now is that he meant only that it was not unnatural. He fascinated a few, but outraged more, when he insisted that the idea is no addition to knowledge, no increase in the number of atoms in the universe, no injection of a divine fluid into human veins, not even (except metaphorically) a

light. It "is not a new faculty of understanding," it is a new principle of coherence in the soul which immediately becomes the foundation "for a new kind of exercises of the same faculty of understanding." Even "principle" is a dangerous word, which he used "for want of a word of a more determinate signification." It usually connotes something added to the previous store, a new substance materialized out of nowhere, but Edwards' point was that for the truly perceptive there has been no more, possibly even less, of a fund of experience than for others, only that into such natures, "either old or new," is laid a method of making coherent what before was incoherent. Though it is always available to the natural man, he can no more employ it than "a man without the sense of hearing can conceive of the melody of a tune." It is, said Edwards in a sentence that proved as enigmatic to his followers as to his enemies, "a natural habit or foundation for action." It is inward, supernatural, mysterious — and also scientifically explicable, empirically verifiable: it gives "a personal ability and disposition to exert the faculties in exercise of such a certain kind," it is activity itself, "a new kind of exercises of the same faculty of the will."

## “Edward’s Master was the Bible, Not Locke”

Vincent Tomas \*

A Philosopher living in the eighteenth, or even the twentieth, century would be a “medieval” philosopher if his philosophy placed itself at the service of Scripture and was willing to take orders from it. Nor is the question whether a philosopher is medieval or modern the question whether what he takes to be truths discovered independently of revelation, and which he tries to integrate with revelation, are truths discovered by an ancient like Aristotle or a modern like Newton or Darwin. It is a question of what he does with these truths, and, ultimately, of what his attitude would be if he were forced, as we shall see Edwards was forced, to choose between what he accepts as revealed truth and a truth of reason or of science which is incompatible with it. . . .

Jonathan Edwards is a medieval philosopher. It is simply not true that, as Mr. Miller says, “the peculiar and fascinating character of his achievement is entirely lost if he be not seen as the first and most radical, even though the most tragically misunderstood, of American empiricists.” Mr. Miller also says, “Though there were other intellectual influences in his life — Calvin, the traditional body of Puritan science, Cudworth, and Hutcheson — yet Locke and Newton were far and away the dominating sources, and from them he acquired almost all his theoretical starting points,” a statement, he adds, “which may seem extreme, [but] is worth emphasizing.” We cannot say that this extreme statement is simply not true, since there is some truth in it, but it throws the emphasis the wrong way, in the direction of modernity. How can anyone who has perused Edwards’ works fail to mention Scripture as one of the dominating intellectual influences in his life? . . .

The omission of any mention of the Bible from a catalogue of influences on Edwards can only be explained as the result of what Ralph Barton Perry has called the fallacy of difference. “The tendency to conceive a sectarian doctrine in terms of its *special*, to the exclusion of its *generic*, characteristics is important enough to deserve a special name — ‘the fallacy of difference.’” It is true that one of the *specific* differences between Edwards and previous Puritans is the presence in his thought of elements that are derived from Newton and Locke. But when Edwards is looked at in the large, and the generic and specific characteristics of his thought are seen in their true proportions and weight, he remains, despite the influence of Newton and Locke, a medieval philosopher, just as Descartes in the large, despite the fact that he incorporated into “inherited principles of medieval philosophy” new conceptions of nature

borrowed from the science of *his* day, remains a medieval philosopher. Edwards was a Puritan first, and a Newtonian or Lockean secondarily. As Professor Perry says, “The main body of puritan doctrine, then, is medieval Christianity. In America, it was the chief link of continuity with the medieval past, being a traditional rather than an innovating doctrine. . . . Whereas puritanism taught men to rely on faith, revelation, and authority, and especially on the authority of the Bible as an authentic revelation of the will of God, the Enlightenment proclaimed the accessibility of truth, even basic truths of religion, to the faculty of reason.” In these words we find the *generic* characteristics of Edwards. If we drop them out of the picture, what we have left is a grin without a cat. It is by virtue of these characteristics that Edwards, like Puritanism in general, “prolonged in America the medieval Christian view of the world and of human destiny. . . .

There are in Edwards numerous places where he arrives at conclusions unacceptable to the modern mind, by arguments not entirely cogent to the modern mind. Yet these conclusions were credible, and these arguments were cogent, to Edwards. The reason is that he accepted Scripture as revealed truth, and the modern mind does not. In this sense, Edwards “took orders” from Scripture, just as an empiricist will not “take orders” from Scripture, but only from experience. . . .

Before concluding, let us notice a place (there are others) where Edwards was willing to “take orders” from Scripture in a much stronger sense than the one previously described. In *Original Sin* he takes up the objection, made by Taylor and others, that it would be unreasonable if God were to treat Adam and his posterity as if they were one, which God must do if the descendants of Adam deserve punishment for Adam’s sin. Just before doing so, and using “fact” in the sense we have described, Edwards says something that Locke would have disapproved of. Locke said, “nothing that is contrary to, and inconsistent with, the clear and self-evident dictates of reason, has a right to be urged or assented to as a matter of faith, wherein reason has nothing to do.” But Edwards says, “with respect to this mighty outcry made against the *reasonableness* of any such *constitution*, by which God is supposed to treat Adam and his posterity as *one*, I would make the following observations. It signifies nothing to exclaim against plain *fact*. . . . Hence, however the matter be attended with difficulty, *fact* obliges us to *get over* it either by finding out some solution, or by shutting our mouths, and acknowledging the weakness and scantiness of our understandings; as we must in other innumerable cases, where apparent and undeniable *fact*, in God’s works of creation and providence, is attended with events and circumstances, the *manner* and *reason* of which are difficult to our understandings.” He then proceeds to work out the argument which Mr. Miller describes as “the most profound moment in his philosophy,” and which so

---

\* Tomas, Vincent. “The Modernity of Jonathan Edwards,” *New England Quarterly*, XXV (March, 1952).

many other commentators have also admired. The argument is that since the existence of every created thing depends at every moment on God's sovereign will, and the identity or oneness of created objects existing through time depends on God's will, therefore there is no difficulty in believing that God can reasonably treat Adam and his posterity as if they were one. Granted its ingenuity, this argument is the desperate expedient of a thinker who was willing to take orders from Scripture as he understood it, and who would "get over" a difficulty that is no difficulty to those for whom reason and experience are a sufficient substitute for revelation. It is, in a word, the argument of a medieval, not a modern, philosopher.