

NEWTON'S TIME, LOCKE'S IDEAS, AND JONATHAN'S SPIDERS

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Much has been written on Jonathan Edwards. More needs to be written, though not for reasons that are sometimes given for using a local product, that it is ours, or that it is cheap. Whether most or many trying to do philosophical work in North America now can or will or would want to think of Jonathan Edwards as *ours* is debatable. And working on Edwards does not come cheap, is hardly economical for philosophers: his works are long and tedious, one must get into so much more, the whole story of New England Puritanism and Calvinist theology, to see what Edwards was up to, the ground has been gone over so often that one might think that in this case all the data are in, and one may ask whether philosophers have much or anything to learn from Edwards.

Connections between Locke and Edwards, similarities between Berkeley and Edwards, similarities and differences between Edwards and later American philosophers have often been discussed. The best studies of Edwards, one still the most comprehensive and profound, the other, in spite of certain self-imposed limitations, the most suggestive, are Perry Miller's pioneering study,¹ and James Carse's more recent *Jonathan Edwards & the Visibility of God*.²

Granting his brilliance, his dialectical subtlety, some might question whether in any vital sense Edwards was a philosopher at all. Certainly he did not think of himself as writing works of philosophy. He wrote revivalist sermons. He wrote narrative accounts, with psychological analysis and theological interpretation, intended to justify and provide criteria for judging genuineness of the "surprising conversions" associated with the Great Awakening in which he and other revivalist preachers were active during the late 1730's and early 1740's. He wrote for the same purpose a work on *Religious Affections*,³ often called a classic in the psychological study of religious experience, though it is essentially a work of biblical citation and exegesis. He wrote massive theological polemics against what he considered the major theological heresy of his day, Arminianism, which with its doctrine of freedom of the will seemed to undermine what Edwards took to be scriptural doctrines of the sovereignty of God and the total helplessness of humans to break out of their inherent sinfulness. He intended to write a complete system of theology. What Perry Miller calls Edwards' "Uncompleted Summa" was to have been "A Rational Account of the Main Doctrines of the Christian Religion Attempted." In this projected work Edwards intended to show "how all arts and science, the more

they are perfected, the more they issue in divinity.”⁴ Toward the end of his life Edwards discovered in a series of sermons preached earlier an outline for “a great work, which I call a *History of the Work of Redemption*, a body of divinity in an entire new method, being thrown into the form of a history.”⁵ One of the reasons he cited against his taking the Presidency of the College of New Jersey was his desire to execute this work.

He told the trustees that he would deploy the narrative ‘from eternity,’ through the Creation, to the end of the Creation which shall ‘last to eternity,’ along the way ‘particularly considering all parts of the grand scheme, in their historical order.’ He would carry the story . . . with regard to the three worlds of heaven, earth, and hell; he would introduce doctrines as they emerged out of the course of change and alteration, in a manner scriptural but also ‘most natural,’ . . . [a method that] would be ‘most beautiful and entertaining.’⁶

As everyone knows, the trustees prevailed on Edwards. He went to Princeton, found smallpox epidemic, had himself inoculated, got smallpox and died. Miller suggests that if Edwards had lived to transmit to Princeton his philosophical and theological doctrines, the history of American thought might have been significantly different: Edwards might have exerted positive influence on the shaping of the American mind, rather than becoming as he did a source of proof-texts and dialectic for conservative Calvinists. Miller uses the term “tragedy” to characterize the conflict between Edwards and the principal members, the pillars of his Northampton congregation (who were aided by Edwards’ Western Massachusetts relatives and theologically liberal members of the Boston clergy who despised the flaming revivalism of Edwards and the enthusiastic “new lights”). The conflict led to Edwards’ removal, to his exile as missionary to the Indians at Stockbridge, which allowed him to write *Freedom of the Will*, *The Nature of True Virtue*, and *Original Sin*.

One of the fascinating things about Edwards is that at some point in his philosophical thinking he resembles almost every thinker of the modern period: To solve the freedom-determinism problem he used at one point essentially the same distinction that Ryle makes in *The Concept of the Mind* to dispose of the confusion between explanation in terms of mechanical or physical processes and explanation in terms of motives, character traits or intelligent capacities. Edwards’ philosophy has often been compared to Berkeley’s (they both came to their positions largely by studying Locke and Newton, though Edwards liked more of what he read in both than Berkeley did). But none of this seems to be the essential point.

My suggestion is that the significance Edwards has for present philosophical reflection is different in kind from the significance that thinkers like Berkeley or Edwards’ contemporary Hume has. The philosopher whom I think Edwards most significantly resembles for our purposes is a

philosopher of a very different kind. That philosopher is Karl Marx. Marx and Edwards: comparing them reveals a use of philosophy not often countenanced at present. Each developed his own characteristic set of philosophical tools: definitions, basic categories, epistemological *loci communes*, methodological premisses. Each developed his set of philosophical tools by sympathetic but incisively critical reading of philosophers of the previous generation, philosophers who had developed new and powerful ways of approaching almost any kind of subject matter in ways that seemed to make it possible to untie (not cut) the Gordian knots blocking progress not in the realm of speculative philosophy but in the realm of *praxis*, of human activity. In Marx’s case the philosophers were Hegel and Feuerbach, in Edwards’ case Locke and Newton. The use to which each put the philosophers he learned from was the same. Each derived analytical tools and an ideology from his critical study of the philosophers who influenced him. In both cases the process is open to public examination: the economic and philosophical manuscripts that Marx did not publish or intend for publication, his critique of Hegel’s philosophy of Right, his essay “On the Jewish Question,” and especially the theses on Feuerbach provided him with methodological and ideological starting points for his later activity, his political activity as well as his writing. In the same way, for Edwards, those early notes “On Natural Science,” on “The Mind,” even “Of Insects” and the very large number of notes that he included in his *Miscellanies* until the 1750’s when he began writing the major works provided his store of methodological starting points and his ideology.

I use the term “ideology” deliberately, in an accepted technical sense: both Marx and Edwards, from their critical study of the philosophers who influenced them, developed lines of theory which they used both to secure a basic intellectual position and as guides to practice, practice designed to change the societies they lived in. Each had a conscious and self-critical theory of the role of ideology, although Edwards did not have the term. Each believed that the major problem of method in philosophical analysis is not theoretical or epistemological but practical. Or rather, each believed that the real solution to the epistemological problem is to be found on the level of *praxis*, not on a conceptual or theoretical level. People arrive at false views of the world not because they reason badly, and not because they pay insufficient attention to the evidence of the senses, but because they view the evidence in perspectives limited by self-interest. An ideology is simply a theoretical perspective which distorts one’s view of the evidence in accordance with the requirements of the interested self or group whose perspective it is. As such it serves as a guide for and a justification of practice.

Certainly there are differences between Edwards and Marx. But for each, practical activity rested on a vision of what the world could become or what the world would become, if the partial and limited perspectives could be shattered, and if human beings, freed from the prison of self-interested, group-interested bias, could see things as they really are. For both the solution was to be a practical one: one did not eliminate conflict of interest from the world by teaching people to be objective and benevolent, or even by preaching (in the conventional sense) to them about it. For Marx, one had to create the truth by creating the classless society, by eliminating the tyranny of economic necessity from the world and by eliminating the social and political and ideological fetters that had been forged to enable societies to function in contexts of economic scarcity. This would be accomplished by human beings taking charge of economic and social forces generated by exercise of human capacity to transform the material world into value through activity, through work, giving the world a human image.

For Edwards, one has to *enact* the truth in human feeling. Basically the material (what Edwards calls the objective or natural) order is to remain the same: freedom (in one of its senses) consists in coming to feel differently about it. This is imprecise, for what is involved is a different way of perceiving the objective order, a new way of understanding it, but the key to Edwards' practice is his refusal to separate understanding from feeling (from what he calls "affection" or "sensible inclination"). Here Edwards resembles Spinoza, and like Spinoza, Edwards believed that the new way of understanding, or feeling about, the world (Spinoza's intellectual love of God) would be accompanied by changes in individual and social practice. Both Marx and Edwards used their ideological reference points as guides to practice and each consciously attempted to use practice to correct the ideology. Marx's writings on the events of 1848 were the first of his attempts to clarify and correct theory from the results of practice. Edwards used the experiences of the Great Awakening to correct and refine his theory. Particularly in *Religious Affections* he attempted to clarify, to correct, and to refine his theory. Both tried to relate theory to practice in such a way that increasingly the ideological taint—the partiality, the self-interested bias, would be refined and expanded out of the ideology. In this sense both were empiricists (though not only in this sense) attempting to put into practice what became in Marxism the well known unity of theory and practice.⁷ Interestingly, by the time he wrote *Religious Affections*, Edwards' polemic was directed more against the excesses of the enthusiasts (his own party) than against the already proper Bostonian clergy who has opposed the revival. And as Miller notes, in his farewell sermon at Northampton, Edwards at least suggested that there

was some justice on the side of his parishioners in casting him out on the charge of subverting the community to his (unrecognized) private ends. He had expected the revival to cool (if it did not eventuate in the millenium) and had hoped to consolidate its results before the cooling off period by extracting a reorganization of attitudes and practices from his parishioners. This was perhaps one decisive factor in the chain of events that led to his removal.

The most famous works of both were consciously and deliberately written as ideological instruments. The *Manifesto* was intended as a political act that would contribute to ending the oppressive economic-social order. *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* was intended as an enactment of feeling that could occasion the death of self-interested selves. Edwards' sermons were aimed directly not at description or characterization but at enactment of a sense of utter moral worthlessness of the self-interested self. They were aimed indirectly at a reversal of feeling, a sense of disinterested love for being in general. The major theoretical, philosophical task that each confronted before he could begin to try to bring unity to theory and practice was the same: to give determinate preliminary meaning and coherent relationship to three great themes, the themes that on the theoretical level have proved the speculative Gordian knot since the beginning of the modern period, since Bacon, Descartes, and Hobbes: the themes of determinism, freedom and providence.

What then were the sources, what was the content of Edwards' ideology? I have tried to indicate them in the title of the paper. First, the spiders. It is often said that Edwards used Newton and Locke to try to rehabilitate Calvinist theology. This is not exactly true. Although Edwards could call himself a Calvinist, he was critical of Calvin at major points. He seldom *uses* Calvin. Nor was Edwards trying to rehabilitate the earlier New England Calvinism. He repudiated several of its major points, especially the New England Federalist notion of the Covenant. The major source of Edwards' thought that can be described as coming from his New England background involves a sensed difficulty in reconciling two levels of his own experience.

Edwards tell us in his *Personal Narrative* that

From my childhood up, my mind has been full of objections against the doctrine of God's sovereignty, in choosing whom he would to eternal life, and rejecting whom he pleased. It used to appear like a horrible doctrine to me.⁸

Yet already at age twelve he had written the famous essay on flying spiders that concluded with a precocious description of God's sovereignty at work in the natural order. The flying spiders that Jonathan had so finely observed were an excellent example of God's ordering of the world in such a way that private pleasure apparently led to public good. For by

what must be recreation and utility to the spiders, their flying through the air and catching all manner of insects, they rid the air of filth, then are swept out to the ocean, so that

we may behold and admire at the wisdom Of the Creator and be Convinced from Prvd (Providence) there is exercised about such little things, in this wonderful Contrivance of Annually Carrying of and burying the Corrupting nauseousness of our Air, of which flying insects are little Collections in the bottom of Ocean where it will do no harm and especially the strange way of bringing this About in Spiders (which are collections of these collections their food being flying insects) . . .⁹

Edwards remained a determinist about both orders, the natural and the moral. I take as a sufficient criterion of a determinist position, what Bernard Berofsky has called the *unicity condition*: "At any particular time t , what occurs in the world at t —or perhaps, what occurs at or prior to t —restricts future possibilities to one."¹⁰ Like another eighteenth century student of Newton and of British empiricism, a greater than Edwards, but who, while Edwards was reading Hume in Stockbridge, still remained in dogmatic slumber, Edwards had to show that determinism was different in the two realms, that determinism in the natural realm is compatible with freedom in the moral realm, but that moral freedom involves a kind of determinism (really two kinds) rather than indeterminacy. He did not do this by arguing like Kant that space and time, the forms under which mechanical determinism functions, are inapplicable to the moral realm. Rather, he turned to Newton and to Locke to show that God's determinism (providence) is active in both the natural and the moral realms, that there is no contradiction between them, that the tension is only apparent. Edwards did something with each of Newton's three great physical entities, space, time, and mass, and to his satisfaction solved *metaphysically* the riddle of gravitation. Gravitation, contrary to the way many Newtonians were disposed to treat it, was a genuine function of matter—of mass or solidity. The essence of matter, its mass or solidity, is its resistance. Thus an atom is the concept of a limit, an ideal point, where resistance is concentrated. The solidity or mass of an object is "nothing but the Deity, acting in that particular manner, in those parts of space where he thinks fit."¹¹ Atoms in fact are regions of space where God's activity is concentrated, and Space—"this necessary, eternal, infinite, and omnipresent being"¹² which since it is an infinite Being, cannot be solid, since solidity is nothing but resistance to other solidities—Space is God Himself. Thus the natural order, the objective order, is simply the determinate activity of God Himself. It is determinate, and determined. Edwards' treatment of causality is not as mechanical or efficient: it is Berkleyan or Humean. "Necessity" in the philosophical sense means "really nothing else than the full and fixed connection between the things

signified by the subject and predicate of a proposition, which affirms something to be true."¹³ A difference between Edwards and Berkeley is that the objective order of nature does not just exist as God's activity in us, as our ideas, though the nature of Matter is ideal. Matter is God's activity: it exists as God's self-determination. And God exists as objective presence in the natural order.

But we do not see things as they are in themselves. Here Edwards mobilizes Locke's theory of ideas. Our only source of knowledge of the objective order is through sensation. The source of our knowledge of nature and thus of God is sense experience. But our perceptions are shaped by our inclinations, we see things as we are disposed to see them. Edwards also adopts Locke's treatment of freedom of the will (but simplifies it) to show that moral determinism is compatible with freedom: we are free when we are not hindered from doing what we want or desire or will to do. But it is ridiculous to ask whether we are free to want or not want what we want (or to will or not will what we will). ("Liberty . . . is the power a *man* has to do or forbear doing."¹⁴) Like Locke and like Spinoza, Edwards rejects a faculty theory distinction between understanding and willing. In fact he identifies willing with desiring and feeling. Although Edwards does not seem to go as far as Spinoza in identifying understanding and will, he allows for a dry, abstract understanding without sensible inclination: what he seems to mean is that people can learn to make appropriate moves in language games without really seeing—feeling—the realities (the ideas) to which the terms refer.

In the title I have called attention to Newtonian time. As Miller suggests, Edwards while he was a student and tutor at Yale gave critical attention to Locke's theory of ideas and to Newton's concepts of space, mass, and gravitation. At Northampton and Stockbridge he turned his attention to time. Milic Capek has written of the principle of the causal inefficacy of time in classical physics, citing Clerk Maxwell and others to show that "the homogeneity of time was regarded as the basis for the unity of nature in time, that is, as the logical ground for induction; the belief in the timeless universality of the laws of nature was based on the same ground."¹⁵ Edwards used this principle in his work on *Original Sin* to argue that, given sinfulness as the law of human nature, the Arminians are wrong in affirming that any human can exercise the slightest degree of genuine virtue through his own agency. He concluded that Newtonian time, like Newtonian matter, is atomic. Just as God acts in concentrated spatial points of resistance and attraction—and an atom can be of any size, even the size of the universe—He realizes himself in discrete moments of time. But the universe as God's activity is not an eternal or timeless atom. It is a series of discrete moments. Edwards appealed to the notion

of the discreteness of moments in the temporal series to argue that God must constantly uphold (or recreate) the universe, since "no cause can produce effects in a *time* and *place* in which it itself is *not*. It is plain, nothing can exert itself, or operate, *when* and *where* it is not existing. But the Moon's past existence was neither *where* nor *when* its present existence is. In point of *time*, what is *past* entirely ceases when *present* existence begins. . . ."¹⁶ This applies both to the objective order of nature and the subjective order of our perceptions. Our perceptions in fact are a distorted reflection of nature (again the similarity to Marx). The order of nature (including our perceptions as a part of that order) possesses natural goodness. Moral goodness depends on the basic inclination which determines how we see and respond to the natural order, which basic inclination is the organizing principle of our sense experience.

Time is crucial in another way: there is an order to history. The decree or law that determines order (like Newton's laws govern the order of physical events) presides over the historical sequence, in some sense stands above it and beyond it, but becomes a matter of historical record. A historically enacted fact, humans can read it through their senses:

By that perception, their wills may be determined, so that they can play a constructive role in the historical process. This is their happiness, this their consent to what must be, this is excellency.¹⁷

Basically, as Edwards spells out in *The Nature of True Virtue*, virtue consists in our consent and adherence to being in general.¹⁸ All other attitudes, from the most apparently selfish to the most seemingly unselfish, as instances of love to a particular group or groups of being at the expense of a general, disinterested consent to being in general, are morally vicious. It is this partial love, this interested love—wholly natural to humans, in fact, the basis to this point of human survival and of all natural systems of morality—this is the human predicament, the depravity of human nature, the source of injustice and oppression (disguised as economic and moral necessity) in human society. Edwards came to believe that human salvation consists in one's coming to see the objective order as wholly good apart from its effects on us or on any group of persons in whom we are interested, in coming to love that order according to which, apart from human merit (for there is none) God chooses whom he pleases eternally to perish and be everlastingly tormented in hell, and whom he pleases to have eternal life. In fact he came to believe that any who loved the objective order of things apart from all personal interest would come to have genuine benevolence toward all being.¹⁹ His moral vision of an order of human dignity and justice seized on this conception as an answer to the Arminian teaching that those who strive to accomplish good are likely to succeed and be worthy of the fruits of their striving. Edwards'

strategy was to enact a society of universal benevolence by preaching in such a way that a new simple idea, the genuine religious affection, might become actual in the perception of his hearers. Like Wittgenstein, Edwards believed that the ethical and religious could not be spoken about. They could only be shown, i.e., for Edwards, communicated by ideas. Perry Miller has shown how Edwards' practice in making sermons was based on Locke's theory of ideas, how it was related to Berkeley's theory of the function of language and his criticism of abstract ideas.²⁰ This cannot be discussed here. What can be said is that Edwards' attempt to enact moral feeling—true virtue—or religious affection through preaching rested on his vision of a society in which

' . . . many of the Negroes and Indians will be divines, and excellent books will be published in Africa, in Ethiopia, in Tartary, and other of now the most barbarous countries.' . . . There will be peace and love everywhere; wars between nations will be replaced with good understanding. 'Then shall all the world be united in one amiable society.'²¹

He saw Arminianism as an ideological mask for self-interest, a pretended balanced view of man which merely validated the collective self-interest of the merchants of Boston and Northampton (the court party) as against the poor (the country party) who were being ground down by what were only natural factors, calculations of economic self-interest in an inflationary period, and as against the interest of the Negroes and Indians and the people of now the most barbarous countries, in complete blindness to being in general. The revival, as far as Edwards was concerned, was the attempt to enact consent and adherence to being in general.

NOTES

¹ Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Meridian Books, Inc., 1959).

² James Carse, *Jonathan Edwards & the Visibility of God* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967).

³ Throughout this paper, I refer to Edwards' works by their shorter, well-known abbreviated titles rather than by the longer but more strictly correct titles Edwards gave them.

⁴ Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 308.

⁷ Alfred G. Meyer, *Marxism: the Unity of Theory and Practice* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1963).

⁸ Jonathan Edwards, "Personal Narrative" in Clarence H. Faust and Thomas H. Johnson, *Jonathan Edwards* (New York: American Book Company, 1935), p. 58.

⁹ Jonathan Edwards, "Of Insects" in Vergilius Ferm (ed.), *Puritan Sage: Collected Writings of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Library Publishers, 1953), p. 6.

¹⁰ Bernard Berofsky, *Determinism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 5.

¹¹ Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

¹² Jonathan Edwards, "Notes on Natural Science" ("Of Being") in Ferm, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

¹³ Jonathan Edwards, "Freedom of the Will" in Paul Ramsey, ed., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 152.

¹⁴ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, Chapter 21.

¹⁵ Milič Čapek, *The Philosophical Impact of Contemporary Physics* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1961), p. 49.

¹⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *Original Sin*, Part IV, Ch. II, Clyde A. Holbrook (ed.) in John E. Smith (general ed.), *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. III (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

¹⁷ Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 314.

¹⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), p. 8.

¹⁹ Like *The Dhammapada* 354 (Baltimore: Penguin Books, Inc., 1973), trans. Juan Mascaró, p. 85. Edwards would say: "The gift of Truth conquers all gifts. . . . The loss of Desire conquers all sorrows." See also Thomas Merton, "Marxism and Monastic Perspectives" in *The Asian Journals of Thomas Merton*, Naomi Berton, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (eds.) (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1973), Appendix VII. "Both Christianity and Buddhism argue that the root of man's problems is that his consciousness is all fouled up and he does not apprehend reality as it fully and really is; that the moment he looks at something, he begins to interpret it in ways that are prejudiced and predetermined to fit a certain wrong picture of the world, in which he exists as an individual ego in the center of things. This is called by Buddhism *avydia*, or ignorance. From this basic ignorance, which is our experience of ourselves as absolutely autonomous individual egos—from this basic wrong experience of ourselves comes all the rest. This is the source of all our problems. Christianity says almost exactly the same thing in terms of the myth of original sin. I say 'myth of original sin,' not trying to discredit the idea of original sin, but using 'myth' with all the force of the word that has been given to it by scholars like Jung. . . ." p. 332.

²⁰ See Perry Miller, "The Rhetoric of Sensation" in *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 167-83.

²¹ Carse, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

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