



**JONATHAN EDWARDS**

1703-1758

# Edwards: Ethics for Both the Vulgar and the Learned<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) in effect lived two lives: one as the pastor of churches in New England, teaching his people the faith and including in that the ethical side or outworking of the faith, the other as a theorist of God's relation to his universe. These two roles need to be borne in mind in what follows. The first is closely connected with doctrinal and practical themes of the Christian faith, the second with the meaning and truth of ethical matters at their most fundamental level. To have a rounded view of Edwards's ethics, we need both.

## **Keywords**

*Jonathan Edwards, Ethics, true religion, doctrine and life, John Locke, Religious Affections, Nature of True Virtue, Charity and Its Fruits*

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**I**n his *Principles of Human Knowledge*, published in 1710, George Berkeley gave the world his subjective idealism, saying that to be is to be either perceived or a perceiver, and hence that “particular bodies, of what kind soever do none of them exist whilst they are not perceived.” To this rather counterintuitive thesis, he considers this objection: “Would

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<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this article appeared in *A Reader's Guide to the Major Writings of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Nathan A Finn and Jeremy M. Kimble (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 193–208, and was the basis of a lecture at the Jonathan Edwards Centre, University of Liverpool, June 2018.

not a man deservedly be laughed at, who should talk after this manner? I answer, he would so; in such things we ought to *think with the learned and speak with the vulgar*.” So this dislocation between the two worlds that Jonathan Edwards occupied required the skill “to think with the learned, and to speak with the vulgar.”<sup>2</sup>

The youthful Edwards took this distinction on. In an unpublished work in the 1720s, he wrote that he meant to communicate “as if the material world were existent in the same manner as is vulgarly thought.”<sup>3</sup> He carried this outlook into his activities as a minister and author.

In Edwards’s ethical writings, the line of argument is aimed at the vulgar. In *The Freedom of the Will* (1754), Edwards strongly expressed his view that the topic must be discussed in everyday language, not in the specialist language of scholasticism or the refined style of the metaphysicians of his day.<sup>4</sup> *Religious Affections* was preached before it was published, and *Charity and Its Fruits* consists of sermons. An exception is *The Nature of True Virtue*, which is aimed at the learned. But all these books tell the same ethical tale.

In estimating the significance of particular writings of Edwards, one needs to bear in mind that throughout his life he was an inveterate note-taker and annotator and that he suffered an untimely death, leaving behind unfinished written material in various states. In the Yale University Press edition of his *Works*, virtually all his writings—previously published and unpublished private jottings, as well as works in preparation—are available. However, it happens that in the area of ethics, all of the three of the writings already mentioned were finished by the time of his death. *Religious Affections*, *Charity and Its Fruits*, and a shorter work, *The Nature of True Virtue*, were finished by Edwards and published or ready for publication when he died. *Charity and Its Fruits* was preached in 1738 and published posthumously by a grandson, Tryon Edwards, in 1852, and *The Nature of True Virtue* was published along with *God’s End in Creation* by Ezekiel Hopkins in 1765.

*The Nature of True Virtue*, the shortest of these works, is a product of Edwards the philosophical theologian, written in the language of the learned, a short treatment of deep questions on moral value and meta-ethics, questions like, What ought our moral purposes to be, and how are they

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<sup>2</sup> George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710; repr., Cambridge: Hackett, 1982), 51.

<sup>3</sup> References to Edwards’s writings are to *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Perry Miller, John E. Smith, and Harry S. Stout (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009–), hereafter *WJE* followed by volume and page number. Here, Jonathan Edwards, *The Mind*, in *WJE* 6:354.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Freedom of the Will* (1754), in *WJE* 1:150: “as vulgarly used”; see also 150–51, 155.

grounded in reality? What is moral virtue, and what is its nature? What is love? Are there truths in ethics, or simply expressions of feeling? He linked this essay with another, *God's Last End in Creation*, though this linkage does not add much as far as Edwards's ethics are concerned, and so I shall disregard it here.

There is quite a bit of evidence that Edwards the learned theorist was keen to make a mark in Europe, and these short works were aimed at both the export and home markets. Reflecting on *The Nature of True Virtue* will provide us with an understanding of the dimensions of Edwards's interests in this field, as well as of some of his distinctive positions. Despite all this, his views on ethics were of one piece, as we shall see.

## I. Religious Affections

Let us begin by considering the earliest, *Religious Affections*.

Besides Berkeley, another early and lasting influence on Edwards was the English gentleman and Arminian John Locke. In his account of religious affections, Edwards depends<sup>5</sup> on Locke more than is generally realized.<sup>6</sup> For example, his references to regeneration/conversion as consisting in the God-given acquisition of a new inward perception<sup>7</sup> are in accord with Locke's recognition that God "doth sometimes enlighten men's minds in the apprehending of certain truths ... by the immediate influence and assistance of the Holy Spirit, without any extraordinary signs accompanying it."<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Edwards broadens Locke's tests to include moral and spiritual fruit. No doubt, theologically speaking, Edwards offered a "puritanized" version of Locke by having a more developed appreciation of the connectedness of Word and Spirit, which is an important feature of *Religious Affections*. The three parts of the book have to do with effective or ineffective tests for regeneration and conversion. Though he never mentions Locke by name, his dependence on Locke follows the contours of Locke's views on faith and reason and religious enthusiasm. After all, he preached mostly to the vulgar, less so to the learned.

It is not being argued here that the very fact of the use of tests for the reasonableness of certain phenomena shows that Edwards was a follower of

<sup>5</sup> The paragraphs that follow are adapted from the author's *Human Nature from Calvin to Edwards* (Grand Rapids, Reformed Heritage Books, 2018), chapter 8.

<sup>6</sup> See also Paul Helm, "Jonathan Edwards, John Locke, and *Religious Affections*," *Jonathan Edwards Studies* 6.1 (2016): 3–15.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746), in *WJE* 2:205.

<sup>8</sup> John Locke, *Essay*, 5th ed. (1706), 2 vols., ed. John W. Yolton (London: Dent, Everyman's Library, 1961), 4.19.16.

Locke and no one else. Setting up the tests of which the *Religious Affections* is full was a part of Puritan practical theology, and Edwards cites a good example of such a test in Thomas Shepard's *The Parable of the Ten Virgins*.<sup>9</sup> Also, it may be that Locke gets his fondness for tests via English Puritanism. Nevertheless, Edwards follows Locke in respect to reason and revelation, and, more importantly, he follows Locke's argument that the chief human motivations to action are the enjoyment of pleasure and the avoidance of pain.

Edwards's doctrine of the "new sense," a "new simple idea," as given to us in the *Religious Affections* deliberately meets the Lockean approach. It is an immediate, supernatural intuition from God, not from man, that is validated by reason as such. Locke thinks that such experiences are legitimate, provided that they are subordinated to and informed by revelation. Edwards provides such tests, appealing to reason<sup>10</sup> and revelation in so doing. For Edwards, Lockean "enthusiasm" is not "spiritual." Edwards likewise dismisses the idea of new revelations and the acquisition of new faculties.<sup>11</sup> No doubt Locke would have regarded the various agitations of the body that Edwards condoned or encouraged—such as those that his wife Sarah related to him<sup>12</sup>—as rather unbecoming and even somewhat embarrassing, but he could hardly have argued that in and of themselves they had significant negative epistemological value. (More on Locke's view on bodily agitations is to follow.) In any case, as we know, Edwards thought in the main that such agitations were neither here nor there as far as providing evidence of a genuine work of the Holy Spirit is concerned.

Affections are central to the book, of course. Despite Edwards's Puritan background, the account he gives of an affection was also mostly the result of direct Lockean influence. For the Puritans, in general, the emotions or affections were subordinate to the intellect or reason and needed disciplining. Edwards, following Locke, had a more unified account of the human self or heart, and so the affections were more central to his anthropology. Before the long chapter 21, "Of Power," in book 2 of *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, which Edwards used overtly in his account of human action in *Freedom of the Will*, Locke placed a shorter discussion, chapter 20, "Of

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Shepard (1605–1649), the author of *The Parable of the Ten Virgins Opened and Applied* (1659). Shepard was minister at Cambridge, Massachusetts, from 1639 to 1649, having arrived from England shortly before. Edwards frequently cites him on the importance of self-examination.

<sup>10</sup> Edwards, *Affections*, 2:132.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:210.

<sup>12</sup> Sarah wrote out an account of what happened to her, and Edwards published an anonymized version of it in *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion* (1742), in *WJE* 4:331–41.

Modes of Pleasure and Pain.” I will try to display the close similarity, if not identity, of their views, by quoting first Locke verbatim, and then Edwards.<sup>13</sup>

First Locke:

1. Amongst the simple *ideas* which we receive both from *sensation* and *reflection*, *pain* and *pleasure* are two very considerable ones. For as in the body there is sensation barely in itself, or accompanied by *pain* or *pleasure*, so the thought or perception of the mind is simply so, or else accompanied also with *pleasure* and *pain*, delight or trouble, call it how you please. These, like other simple *ideas*, cannot be described, nor their names defined; the way of knowing them is, as of the simple ideas of the senses, only by experience. ...

2. Things then are good and evil, only in reference to pleasure or pain. That we call good, which is *apt to cause or increase pleasure, or diminish pain in us; or else to procure or preserve us the possession of any other good or absence of any evil*. And, on the contrary, we name that *evil which is apt to produce or increase any pain, or diminish any pleasure in us: or else to procure us any evil, or deprive us of any good*. By pleasure and pain, I must be understood to mean of body or mind, as they are commonly distinguished; though in truth they be only different constitutions of the mind, sometimes occasioned by disorder in the body, sometimes of thoughts in the mind.

3. *Pleasure and pain* and that which causes them, good and evil, are the hinges on which our *passions* turn.<sup>14</sup>

Locke then goes on to illustrate this by reference to the various affections: love, hatred, and so on. Toward the end of the chapter, he makes some remarks on the effects that pleasure and pain may have on the body.

The passions too have most of them, in most persons, operations on the body, and cause various changes in it; which, not being always sensible, do not make a necessary part of the *idea* of each passion. For *shame*, which is an uneasiness of the mind upon the thought of having done something which is indecent or will lessen the valued esteem which others have for us, has not always blushing accompanying it.<sup>15</sup>

Locke is claiming the following. Firstly, the ideas of pleasure and pain are essentially *simple ideas*, that is, ideas that we cannot understand by their

<sup>13</sup> Locke's *Essay*, first published in 1689, went through five editions in his lifetime. Edwards is reckoned to have first read the book around 1717. George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 62. The fourth edition of the *Essay* (1700) contained, amongst other new material, the chapter “Of Enthusiasm,” which was retained in the fifth (1706) and subsequent editions. Locke died in 1704. Edwards purchased and used the two-volume seventh edition of the *Essay* (London, 1716). It is listed in his “Account Book” (a register of books that he owned and lent to others). See “Catalogues of Books,” in *WJE* 26:337–38. (I am grateful to Doug Sweeney for this information.) Currently, the most direct route to the seventh edition is the identical fifth edition (1706).

<sup>14</sup> John Locke, *Essay*, 2.20.1–3. All the italicizations are in the original.

<sup>15</sup> Locke, *Essay*, 2.20.17.

being described, but only by direct experience. Locke is here making a major claim about the philosophical psychology of human action, that actions of aversion are driven by the prospect of pain and those of propensity by the prospect of pleasure. So, secondly, we call that good which is apt to cause pleasure or its increase. We call that evil which is apt to diminish pleasure or directly cause pain. Pleasures or pains embrace both bodily and mental states of affairs and are the hinges on which our passions turn. Thirdly, the prospect of such pains and pleasures are what produce passions such as love and hatred, including both our love of both inanimate and animate things. So, pleasure and pain are the motivators of our actions.

Now we turn to Edwards.

In taking on the Lockean importance of the ideas of pleasure and pain in human motivation, Edwards modified the more intellectual Puritan and Reformed Orthodox account of the affections that he had been brought up on.

There are some exercises of pleasedness or displeasement, inclination and disinclination, wherein the soul is carried but a little beyond a state of perfect indifference. And there are other degrees above this, wherein the approbation or dislike, pleasedness or aversion, are stronger; wherein we may rise higher and higher, till the soul comes to act vigorously and sensibly, and the actings of the soul are with that strength that (through the laws of the union which the Creator has fixed between soul and body), the motion of the blood and animal spirits begins to be sensibly altered; whence oftentimes arises some bodily sensation, especially about the heart and vitals, that are the fountain of the fluids of the body: from whence it comes to pass, that the mind, with regard to the exercises of this faculty, perhaps in all nations and ages, is called the *heart*. And it is to be noted, that they are these more vigorous and sensible exercises of this faculty, that are called the *affections*.<sup>16</sup>

Later on in the book, Edwards continues,

Nor on the other hand, do I know of any rule any have to determine, that gracious and holy affections, when raised as high as any natural affections, and have equally strong and vigorous exercises, can't have a great effect on the body. No such rule can be drawn from reason: I know of no reason, why a being affected with a view of God's glory should not cause the body to faint .... And no such has as yet been produced from the Scripture: none has ever been found in all the late controversies which have been about things of this nature.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Edwards, *Affections*, 2:96–97.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:132–33.

Though, as we have seen, Edwards used the Lockean expression “simple idea” later on in *Religious Affections*, he does not do so at this point. Nevertheless, the Lockean outlook is present in two of Edwards’s propositions. Firstly, the inclinations of the will are of two sorts: those to which the soul is drawn and those to which the soul has an aversion. Secondly, when these inclinations reach a certain strength, they give rise to affections and even to bodily agitations. For Edwards, the world of the living is comprised of two sorts: men and women who have only the simple ideas of the five senses, and men and women who also have a new simple idea of the divine excellency and a distinct set of pleasures. This warrants Edwards’s use of the term “supernatural” to characterize the affections of the regenerate: they are not generated by natural causes, but directly by the Spirit of God.

So for both Locke and Edwards, the understanding judges between good and evil by whether the basic ideas of sensation and reflection are pleasurable or painful. If they are pleasurable, they are good; if painful, evil. That is, of course, good or evil in the estimation of the one who has them. So our passions/emotions are moved by beliefs about the goodness or evil of states of affairs by whether our sensations and reflections are painful or pleasurable. And so our various affections/emotions—love, hatred—are characterized by distinct kinds of pleasure and pain. Edwards puts essentially this same point in terms of degrees of pleasedness or displeasement and notes that these positive and negative qualities have degrees and that the “more vigorous and sensible exercises of this faculty ... are called the *affections*.”<sup>18</sup> And these affections might be so strong as to affect our bodies.

Finally, these mechanisms, which Locke calls “hinges” and which Edwards refers to as the “springs” of action, have fundamental effects in our lives.<sup>19</sup> Here is Locke once again:

The uneasiness a man finds in himself upon the absence of anything whose present enjoyment carries the *idea* of delight with it is that we call *desire*; which is greater or less, as that uneasiness is more or less vehement. Where, by the by, it may perhaps be of some use to remark that the chief, if not only spur to human industry and action is uneasiness.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:97.

<sup>19</sup> In discussions such as those of Locke and Edwards, we see the beginnings of modern utilitarianism, such as that of Jeremy Bentham: “Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*.” Jeremy Bentham, *Introduction to Principles of Morals and Legislation* (London: T. Payne, 1789), i. But while pleasure of a certain kind might be a sign of the moral goodness or badness of an action, Edwards no more than Locke claims that moral goodness *consists in* having sensations of pleasure, or in the maximizing of them.

<sup>20</sup> Locke, *Essay*, 2.20.6.

These words of Locke also are taken up by Edwards:

Such is man's nature, that he is very inactive, any otherwise than he is influenced by some affections, either love or hatred, desire, hope, fear or some other. These affections we see to be the springs that set men agoing, in all the affairs of life, and engage them in all their pursuits; these are the things that put men forward, and carry 'em along, in all their worldly business, and especially are men excited and animated by these, in all affairs, wherein they are earnestly engaged, and which they pursue with vigor.<sup>21</sup>

Why do we spring out of bed in the morning? What sets us “agoing”? The answer of Locke and Edwards is, the prospect of the greater pleasures of the body or the mind (or both) being enjoyed by getting up, or of pains being averted, than those pleasures to be enjoyed, or pains to be averted, by staying in bed—even though getting up, considered by itself, may not be very pleasurable. So when Edwards says, in the opening discussion of *Religious Affections*, that “true religion, in great part, consists in holy affections”<sup>22</sup>—the doctrine he infers from 1 Peter 1:8, “Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory”—he intends to show the front and central place of the affections in energizing “true religion.”<sup>23</sup> “Joy unspeakable” is in Edwards’s estimation joy to a high degree, perhaps to the highest degree humanly possible, an exalted, pleasurable affection arising from faith in the exalted Savior. And if these affections are strong enough, they will result in effects on our bodies, as they did in the case of Sarah Edwards. So, not surprisingly, Edwards says that such affections are the “springs” of our actions, as Locke had called them “hinges.”<sup>24</sup> So the prospect of pleasure and pain is at the heart of Edwards’s account of action, as they were also for Locke.

Now we come to the central argument of *Religious Affections*. The book was in the tradition of works of self-examination by the New England minister Thomas Shepherd and of many a Puritan minister in Old England, and it consists of “signs” as a basis for self-examination. Two sorts of criteria in the search for true religion are described in the section titled “What Are No Certain Signs That Religious Affections Are Truly Gracious, or That They Are Not.” The first includes many of the phenomena that occurred during the Great Awakening, such as dancing and the sudden coming to

<sup>21</sup> Edwards, *Affections*, 2:101.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:95.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:96.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:100–101.

mind of Scripture passages. These are neither here nor there as indicative of a person's spiritual state. Edwards could hardly say otherwise in light of his knowledge of his wife Sarah's bodily contortions during periods of religious ecstasy while she was alone in her room. Such as the Davenports were adamant that such phenomena are by themselves infallible signs of the work of God, but Edwards was not so sure.

The second shows "affections that are truly spiritual and gracious, do arise from those influences and operations on the heart, which are *spiritual*, *supernatural* and *divine*."<sup>25</sup> The most important is this: "the transcendently excellent and amiable nature of divine things, as they are in themselves; and not any conceived relation they bear to self, or self interest."<sup>26</sup> God himself is the fundamental objective of human ethics, the first and supreme object of love and obedience, loved for his beauty and goodness without self-regard. Love for the creature follows closely behind. Their God-centered nature makes godly affections "supernatural."

Despite the influence of Locke, which provides a framework of his thought, Edwards was here following a Puritan and New England pastoral tradition in the main argument of the work.

## II. The Nature of True Virtue

In *The Nature of True Virtue*, a brief essay designed to have an impact on those thinkers who gave various account of virtue in his day, Edwards lays bare and endeavors to resolve an apparent tension in his thought. His style is measured, abstract, and respectful, rather different from those writings that were first preached before they were published. One element of the tension is his strong theocentrism. As we have just noted, Edwards holds that gracious affections, of which love is the foremost, are founded on divine things—which excel and are lovely, as they are loved in themselves—and not in any conceived relation they bear to self or self-interest. This is critical: love to God for who he is, and not what he will or might do for us, is the foundation of true religion.

So the primary and central foundation for true affections and for the Christian morality that they motivate is not self-regard, what God can do for us, but God's excellence as it is in itself, with no relationship to our self-interests. Nevertheless, our other relations and interests to divine things are far from excluded. This is the result of the motivating factors of pleasure and pain in our actions. The central object of gracious affections is God in

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:197.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:240.

himself, and this affection arises from pleasure that centers on God's sublime nature. Can Edwards resolve this tension between our valuing God for his own sake alone and our having an interest in God as a result of having pleasure in him in our gracious affections? He has been criticized by some, such as the nineteenth-century Southern Presbyterian Robert Dabney, for having a "selfish" ethic.<sup>27</sup> Is that fair? We must keep this criticism in view.

Here *The Nature of True Virtue* can help. Herein we hear the voice of Edwards the intensely thinking theologian rather than Edwards the pastor of his people. In rather abstract, philosophical language he outlines this contrast between love for God and love for his created beings, include self-love. True virtue consists in loving "Being in general," that is, "the great system of universal existence."<sup>28</sup> He endorses a standard distinction between the love of benevolence, the affection or disposition to well-being and happiness, and the love of complacency.<sup>29</sup> "Universal existence" is God and his works and will.

*The first object of a virtuous benevolence is Being, simply considered: and if Being, simply considered, be its object, then Being in general is its object; and the thing it has an ultimate propensity to, is the highest good of Being in general.*<sup>30</sup>

This is an account, in the more abstract language of the learned of his day, of our Creator and Lord. Of God alone can it be said that he exists, for he exists necessarily. So Edwards was a nonnaturalist in ethics and an objectivist. We might refer to him as a "supernaturalist." Ethics is not grounded in the states of mind of human beings; rather, its fundamental ground of reference is Almighty God.<sup>31</sup> The way this language echoes the First Commandment, not only as a duty but more particularly as a pleasure, is evident.

Virtue cannot be understood as grounded in a love of virtue, or anything similar, because that is circular reasoning. "Being in general" means intelligent being in all its expressions, but especially the Divine Being and his intelligent creatures. Love as benevolence is seen in our doing what God

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<sup>27</sup> Robert L. Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 99–100. For discussion, see Sean Michael Lucas, "He Cuts Up Edwardsism by the Roots," Robert Lewis Dabney and the Edwardsian Legacy in the Nineteenth-Century South," in *The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards: American Religion and the Evangelical Tradition*, ed. D. G. Hart, Sean Michael Lucas, and Stephen Nichols (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 200–214.

<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, in *WJE* 8:542.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:545.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

wants, in actions of “private” benevolence, as Edwards calls them, which are derivative of and dependent upon love to God. Our ethics must flow from love to God.<sup>32</sup> To the objection that love to God alone is excessively spiritual, Edwards would reply that God’s creation is an immediate consequence of his goodness.

He that has true virtue, consisting in benevolence to Being in general, and in that complacence in virtue, or moral beauty, and benevolence to virtuous being, must necessarily have a supreme love to God, both of benevolence and complacence. And all true virtue must radically and essentially, and as it were summarily consist in this. Because God is not only infinitely greater and more excellent than all other being, but he is the head of the universal system of existence; the foundation and fountain of all being and all beauty; from whom all is perfectly derived, and on whom all is most absolutely and perfectly dependent.<sup>33</sup>

Anyone who has such virtue is drawn to others of that character, to instances of spiritual beauty, exhibiting the love of complacency. So true virtue starts with love to the Supreme Being for his own sake, admiring and taking delight in what he delights in, and so with glorifying him.

This spiritual beauty, that is but a *secondary* ground of a virtuous benevolence, is the ground not only of benevolence but of *complacence*, and is the *primary* ground of the latter; that is, when the complacence is truly virtuous. Love to us in particular, and kindness received may be a secondary ground: but this is the primary objective foundation of it.<sup>34</sup>

Edwards’s prose is formal and technical, one sign of the audience he intends his essay to reach. In the more theological and religious terms he used in *Affections*, this means that virtue first and centrally is expressed in love to God for his own sake. This “fixes” the character of true virtue. Other expressions of benevolence, to the creature, on the basis of love and kindness received, are secondary. Love to others is grounded in love to God for his own sake.

So far as a virtuous mind exercises true virtue in benevolence to created beings, it chiefly seeks the good of the creature; consisting in its knowledge or view of God’s glory and beauty, its union with God, conformity to him, and love to him, and joy in him.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 8:551.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 8:548. Edwards is here referring to the two kinds of love, of complacence and of benevolence.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 8:559.

But what about the area of potential tension we noted between love to God and self-love and love to other created things? To appreciate Edwards's answer to this, we must persevere a little further with *The Nature of True Virtue*. Here we see what Edwards's response would be to Dabney's claim (and to that of John Piper and similar), that his ethics was hedonistic.<sup>36</sup>

Chapter 3 of *The Nature of True Virtue* is a penetrating discussion of self-love and the idea that all ethics proceeds from self-love. That ethics proceeds from individual self-love was one of the fashions of the age, popularized, for example, by Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees: Or, Private Vices, Public Benefits* (1714). However, "self-love" is ambiguous. It may mean "whatever is pleasing to a person," indicating the capacity people have for being pleased or displeased with things. There is no harm in self-love in that sense; it is inevitable. But if self-love denotes a particular object of love, a person's private good, say, or that of his neighbor, or living for the glory of God, then to think of all loving arising from self-love in this sense muddles cause and effect. For it is not our happiness that is loved, but rather the happiness of the other person, say, who is the cause of our delight and admiration, or our benevolence. We take pleasure in these actions. To be productive of or supportive of true virtue, self-love must have as its foundation supreme love to God, a love "in which God is the first and the last." Nothing is of the nature of true virtue in which God is not the first and the last, or which, with regard to their exercises in general, have not their first foundation and source in God's supreme dignity and glory, and in answerable esteem and love of him, and have not respect to God as the supreme end.<sup>37</sup>

From *The Nature of True Virtue*, we can gather something of the general character of Edwards's ethics. Besides being a "supernaturalist," he was a cognitivist, that is, he believed that there are ethical truths because God and his will are the object of morality. And so he did not believe that they are merely subjective or emotive; their objectives are both supernatural and natural in a rather complex way. Being grounded in God, they are supernatural and can only be understood as such by an agent who undergoes a supernatural change (i.e., regeneration) and conversion. Nevertheless, his pleasure-pain approach meant that if an unbeliever made correct ethical judgments—that stealing was wrong, say—this was so because they expressed what is objectively true.

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<sup>36</sup> See, e.g., John Piper, "Was Jonathan Edwards a Christian Hedonist?," *Desiring God*, September 29, 1987, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/was-jonathan-edwards-a-christian-hedonist>; and Paul Helm, "Baring Our Souls—John Piper & Christian Hedonism," *Helm's Deep*, Thursday, July 11, 2011, <https://paulhelmsdeep.blogspot.com/2011/07/baring-our-souls-john-piper-christian.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Edwards, *Nature*, 8:561.

### III. *Ethics and True Religion*

We have seen the definiteness with which Edwards defends the idea that the foundation of virtue is in God himself. Truly virtuous affections come from the work of God's grace in the heart. What exactly true grace consists in was a source of controversy in the revivals. Edwards's view is that ethics is founded not on religion, but rather in what Edwards calls "true religion," which is the work of God in the soul. Its being from God is shown by the possession of a "new sense." As we have seen, *Affections* is primarily taken up with delineating and commending this view. This is why his discussions of virtue have a buoyant, positive note. The difficulties and setbacks to the acquiring of true virtue, of the sort that Paul identifies in Romans 7, which Edwards believes are real enough, and which he occasionally mentions in these writings, remain in the background.

In summary, Edwards claims that the affections of pleasure and pain, and more formally of beauty and excellency, are the product of the heart, of which the intellect is an aspect, and more formally love, which he sees as both an affection and a virtue. Moreover, virtues that are truly gracious are founded firstly in the excellency of God considered in himself and not in how we may be benefitted by him. True self-love—and true religion—is the delighting in God for himself, having "a supreme regard to God," the being of beings. Everything else, our regard for lesser interests, flows from this. For the final example of Edwards writings on ethics, let us consider how he expresses himself in *Charity and Its Fruits*.

### IV. *Charity and Its Fruits*

In these sermons, Edwards sets forth the superiority of charity (or love) over other virtues and calls his people to appropriate self-examination. We will sample his exposition by looking at the first and last chapters.

Love—that disposition or affection whereby one is dear to another—is the sum of the virtues. Edwards places it in its context in 1 Corinthians. "Knowledge" without charity puffs up, but charity builds up (cf. 1 Cor 8:1).<sup>38</sup> Charity is Christian love at its purest, whether exercised towards God or one's fellows.<sup>39</sup> All other projects and aspirations are pointless without it. It is "supernatural" in the special Edwardsian sense of having a divine origin and object. God is love, and therefore the Holy Spirit, who is God, infuses

<sup>38</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits*, in *WJE* 8:130.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:132–33.

love into the soul; this infusion is what distinguishes Christian people from all others. For all true love is the same in principle, whatever its objects. God is loved for excellency, and similarly the saints. And all people have some excellency. (Sometimes it may appear that for Edwards love is reserved for God and the Christian community, and this may be so for the love of complacency, admiration, and delight, but I am sure that this is not his intention for benevolence, in which works of mercy are to reach to needs of people of all kinds.)

In effect, this book of sermons puts further detail on the rather abstract outline of *The Nature of True Virtue*. There he was attempting to reach the learned, while the other writings, *Religious Affections* and *Charity and Its Fruits*, are in the language of the vulgar. God, “the being of all beings,” is always first and central. “A true Christian delights to have God exalted in his own abasement, because he loves God. He is willing to own that God is worthy of this; and it is with delight that he casts himself in the dust before God, because he loves him.”<sup>40</sup>

Edwards proceeds to affirm that other virtues, such as justice, truth, humility, honor, contentment, and peaceableness, all have their root in love (cf. Gal 5:6). So love will dispose us to the whole range of Christian duties.<sup>41</sup> The law in both its tables is summed up in love, and true faith is productive of works of love. Faith works by love. Edwards does not deny that faith alone justifies, but in these writings, he is stressing that true faith is loving, and love will endure when the era of faith comes to an end.

So what is Edwards doing here? He is trying to echo both the stress and the balance of the New Testament. But the language is aspirational: he is calling his hearers to such a life. In characteristic Puritan fashion, the application contains a call to self-examination. He focuses on whether his hearers have such a charitable disposition and whether this disposition shows itself in action. “My little children, let us love neither in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18). “The work of redemption which the gospel makes known, above all things affords motives to love.” Edwards develops this in a Trinitarian direction. Christ had love to the Father. Father and Son are one in love, joined together in the Spirit of love. So Christians should be on their guard against what would lessen or break their love—envy, malice, and bitterness. As Christians must grow in grace, so they should especially grow in the cardinal grace, love.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 8:135.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

The body of the book is an enlarging of this central theme. The last chapter has to do with that state and place when the superiority of love—its purity and unflinchingness—will be manifest. Heaven is a world of love. Charity never fails. Heaven is not only a place where the saints can never sin, but it is also the state in which love is everlastingly communicated to the church.<sup>42</sup> The church was imperfect in the Old Testament and less imperfect in the New. In heaven, the Spirit shall be “more perfectly and abundantly ... given to the church than it now is [on earth].”<sup>43</sup>

God is everywhere, filling both heaven and earth, omnipresent, ubiquitous. Yet in Scripture, he is said to be essentially present in some places rather than others. And so it is in heaven. Heaven is a part of creation that God has built for this end, to be the place of his glorious presence, and it is his abode forever. Here he will dwell and gloriously manifest himself to eternity, and this renders heaven a world of love.<sup>44</sup> For here, in heaven, God himself dwells, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the eternal Three in One—and is manifest, “without any obstacle to hinder access” to him. “There this glorious God shines forth, in full glory, in beams of love.”<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

It is appropriate that we end our account of Edwards’s ethics with his depiction of heaven, where God dwells. For Edwards’s ethics is nothing if not deeply religious. He is far from thinking of ethics as having to do exclusive or primarily with the promotion of good behavior and civic virtues. He lived at a time when there was a great deal of talk about virtue, and especially the virtue of benevolence. To Edwards, however, there seemed to be little place for God, who was portrayed as incidental to the moral life. In contrast, nothing could be truer of Edwards than that his ethics, a virtue ethics, is unmistakably God-centered, for God is the chief source of ethical virtue, through whom all expressions of virtue to the creature flow, and in the love of God all other loves are contained.

We can now see more clearly, perhaps, the character of Edwards’s hedonism. Hedonism is the doctrine that we necessarily do things for pleasure, but that our pleasure is intrinsically good and not an incidental feature of our conduct. As we have seen, the two areas are in apparent tension in Edwards. The first is that considerations of pleasure and pain are what

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:367.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:368.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:370.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

move us to action; the second is that the foundation of true virtue lies in the glorifying of God, the being of beings, for his own sake and not for what we receive by way of pleasure. It is this stress, that virtuous life is rooted in one who is loved for his own sake, and not in our advantage, that imparts to Edwards's ethics an aesthetic tone—it is an ethics of harmony, of beauty. God is not only the source of ethical goodness, but also the first object of ethical goodness. If in ethics we focus exclusively on our private pleasure, or that of our clan or nation, then we are guilty of a certain kind of idolatry.

The second emphasis is that ethics is a matter of the heart, and not principally of law and duty. We must distinguish between the norms or values of an ethical system and the reason why we endeavor to endorse and follow those norms. It is undoubtedly the case that Edwards endorsed the values of the Decalogue: love God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself. It may be said that his ethical writings, including *The Nature of True Virtue*, constitute an all-around meditation on those words. Moreover, he believed that the outworking of these values is delight in the two tables of the Decalogue. The ethical project is, by God's grace and the Spirit's indwelling, to endeavor to realize this delight and to strive to practice these values, embodying them in one's own life.

A final feature of Edwards's ethics is his interaction with the thinking of his own day, as he found it in New England and Europe in the various theories of ethics then current: he was convinced that heaven is the culmination of true religion and the love that is at its center. What is at the heart of his project is love to God and man, the contemplation of the beauty and sublime character of the love of God for sinners. Though he was intensely curious regarding all aspects of this life—the physical world and its science, everyday affairs, the latest news from Europe, the arduous work of the ministry, the promotion of true religion, his endless writings, his own intellectual discoveries and speculations—the center of gravity lay in the life of the world to come: God glorified in the society of the redeemed. He had no inclination to encourage the salvation of the planet as a contribution to moral redemption, or the “transformation” of culture with Christian achievements in art and literature as part of the redemption of society. He is very hazy, and understandably so, about how the redeemed shall be eternally occupied. However, whatever the details of the life to come, it will be a society of love, love between people, grounded in love for the loveliness of the Trinitarian God who has by his grace brought this heavenly society, through its pilgrimage, into fulfillment in his presence. It is then that ethics reaches its eternal climax.

Thinking of ethics as the business of acquiring distinctive virtues has a long tradition in classical philosophy, throughout the Middle Ages, and of course in the New Testament, where the various fruits of the Spirit are often listed. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” Paul says that “against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal 5:22–23). To this list may be added those in Ephesians 4:31–32; Philippians 4:8–9; Colossians 3:12–14; and James 3:17, all of which are usually referred to as the fruits of the Spirit. Second Peter 1:5–7 has a similar list of “virtues,” as they are called. In the New Testament such fruits or virtues are moral dispositions implanted in regeneration, the imparting of Christ’s righteousness, which Christians are to develop in the spirit of Paul’s advice to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil 2:12).

Edwards follows these emphases with little distinct stress on the moral law, though he notes the place of our duties. Yet, as we have seen, the contours of that law are reflected in *The Nature of True Virtue*, at least in Christ’s summary of the law as love to God, the Supreme Being, and love of oneself as the measure of the love of neighbor. This emphasis is transmuted in Edwards’s thought as the growth of virtue through his emphasis on the effects of regeneration on the soul. He does not emphasize duties, though he would not deny that men and women have duties.

I suggest that this reflects the social setting of his work, a society in which people were very familiar with the duties of both tables of the Law, but for whom the great need, in Edwards’s estimation, was “true religion.” It is not surprising that we find him saying, “Many ... have been so long in the school of Christ, and under the teachings of the gospel, they yet still remain; in a great measure, ignorant what kind of a spirit a truly Christian spirit is.”<sup>46</sup> It may be fairly easy for me to convince myself that I keep the law in a social sense—I am a faithful husband, a decent parent or child, pay my taxes, work hard, worship God on Sundays and so forth. But whether my life expresses true virtue, and I possess “true religion,” is a matter of serious introspection, as I seek to assess the state of my heart and the work of the Spirit within it. For all the novelty of the emphasis of Edwards’s thinking, here he is fully in line with the esteemed ministers of New England’s past.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:143.

<sup>47</sup> A further accessible resource on Edwards’s ethics is Michael J. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott, “True Virtue, Christian Love and Ethical Theory,” in *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 528–48.