

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO
JONATHAN EDWARDS

Edited by Stephen J. Stein

~~1802~~



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2006

4 The age of Enlightenment

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From the second half of the seventeenth till the end of the eighteenth century, Western Christianity underwent a profound intellectual transformation; it went through a prolonged series of critical self-reexaminations of its basic intellectual foundations in many spheres – religion and science, society and politics, morals and manners, gender and race, economy and markets, education and childhood, crime and punishment. This reassessment marked the disenchantment of the world and the beginning of the modern age as we know it today. “Our age is, in special degree, the age of criticism,” wrote Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) in *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), “and to criticism everything must submit. Religion through its sanctity, and law-giving through its majesty, may seek to exempt themselves from it. But they then awaken just suspicion, and cannot claim the sincere respect which reason accords only to that which has been able to sustain the test of free and open examination.”¹ The intellectual movement associated with this important ideological and cultural transformation in the history of Western civilization is commonly called the age of Enlightenment.²

Instead of accepting traditional religious worldviews at face value or uncritically adopting the values of established authority, Enlightenment thinkers elevated the role of the mind and emphasized the power of reason, thus leading to the abolition of customarily accepted moral and religious absolutes. “In much the same way that the world became the object of scientific inquiry in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries through a process of desacralisation, so too, religious practices” were “demystified by the imposition of *natural laws*.” As “the physical world ceased to be a theatre in which the drama of creation was constantly re-directed by divine interventions,”³ so too the variety of human experience seemed more and more the outcome of natural and historical processes rather than the work of God. Once considered the sole source and locus for human experience and expectations, religious thought and belief were increasingly pushed out of the realms of nature, politics, ethics, and history.

The “enlightened age” witnessed the replacement of religion by reason as the main agent for providing “objective truths” about the world in which human life is set. The supremacy and primacy of divine revelation were attacked. “The role of reason was magnified, that of revelation was depressed. The scriptures were subjected to intensive and often to unsympathetic scrutiny. Miracles were challenged. Prophecy was reassessed. Christian thought faced a threat which might have stripped it of all its uniqueness and authority.”⁴

Indeed, religion and morality continued to be of primary concern, but they became subject to critical examination. The period is marked by the loss of the unquestioned traditional legitimacy of a divinely instituted order. Enlightenment thinkers fostered trust in human power and ability, arguing for the authority of reason rather than the traditional authority of Scripture. In England most writers, following John Locke (1632–1704), did not substitute reason for Scripture, but called for a more reasonable approach to Scripture. On the continent, rationality was advocated as a means of establishing authoritative systems of thought based on reason, leading humanity toward progress out of what was termed a long period of irrationality, superstition, tyranny, and barbarism. This is ultimately what distinguished Western Christian culture from other civilizations at this period.

To orthodox Christians, such a radical transformation constituted a threat to traditional religious thought and belief. The New England theologian Jonathan Edwards recognized and grappled with the challenges posed to Christian orthodoxy by the emergence of new modes of thought: Deistic attacks on revealed religion, the physical discoveries of Newton, the development of new narratives of history, and the emergence of new moral theories. Indeed, much of Edwards’s life of the mind can be characterized as a struggle “against most of the prevailing errors of the present day,” which tended to “the utter subverting of the gospel of Christ.”⁵ During this time, “every evangelical doctrine is run down,” and many “bold attempts are made” against “Christ, and the religion he taught.”⁶ What sets Edwards apart from many contemporary champions of religious orthodoxy is, indeed, his attempt to provide a serious and systematic alternative to Enlightenment modes of conviction and persuasion. Living in an age of rapid and dramatic intellectual innovations, he took upon himself the task of refuting them.

DEISM

Edwards’s encounter with and reaction to Enlightenment thought is no more apparent than in his long and constant struggle against Deism, as can

be seen in many of his works. The reason for this is not hard to find: the proponents of this mode of thought denied some of Christianity's essential creeds, and their radical ideas were subversive of revealed religion.

Deism emerged in England at the end of the seventeenth century and in the early eighteenth century. It signified the crisis of Christian culture during the age of Enlightenment, as manifested in the fracturing of doctrinal orthodoxy through attacks on established theological culture and authority, such as the authority of the Bible, the integrity and validity of revelation, the credibility of Old Testament prophecies, and the reliability of New Testament miracles.⁷ Deists generally believed in one and only one God who has moral and intellectual virtues in perfection and whose active powers are displayed in the world – a God who created, sustained, and ordered the world by means of divinely sanctioned natural laws, both moral and physical. Emphasizing that God's ordering of events constitutes a general providence but denying special providence, and claiming that miracles or other miraculous divine interventions violate the lawful natural order, the Deists raised the fears that the Jehovah of the Old Testament could hardly be identified with their God and the mechanical God of natural philosophers. Thus in *The Dunciad* (1742), the poet Alexander Pope (1688–1744) denounced the Deist idea of God who is "Wrapt up in Self, a God without a Thought, Regardless of our merit or default."⁸

If Deism was the Enlightenment philosophy of religion, it was above all a religion of reason, a rational religion, or a religion of nature: "there is a Religion of Nature and Reason written in the Hearts of every One of us from the first Creation," claimed Matthew Tindal (1657–1733) in *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, a book considered the "Bible of Deism."⁹ Deist writers stressed belief in a God based on reason and experience in contrast to faith and revelation, and most of them believed that the God who created the universe is known by the light of reason. They therefore questioned revealed religion, or religion based on a special revelation of God, emphasizing instead rational, natural religion. Asserting the existence of a God upon the testimony of reason, they therefore argued that human reason alone is sufficient to provide the knowledge necessary to lead a moral and religious life. John Toland (1670–1722) claimed in *Christianity Not Mysterious*, that "by Reason we arrive at the certainty of God's own existence."¹⁰ Christianity, then, is neither contrary to reason nor above reason.

Deists denied the traditional Christian view of human corruption as well as the belief that human beings' reason is so corrupted by sin that special revelation is necessary for the conduct of moral life. Instead they argued that reason should be the basis of belief and that it is essential in making moral decisions. Tindal declared that "Our Reason, which gives us a Demonstration

of the Divine Perfections," directs us also in regard to ethics and morals "concerning the Nature of those Duties God requires . . . to ourselves, and one another."¹¹ Dwelling on the notion of "natural religion" – a universal genus of religion based on the light of reason or nature – Deists claimed that reason could look up through nature to nature's God. "*Religion of Nature*," argued Tindal, is based on "every Thing that is founded on the Reason and Nature of Things," and it "consists in observing those Things, which our Reason, by considering the Nature of God and Man, and the Relation we stand in to him and one another, demonstrates to be our Duty."¹² Deism thus offered a new and optimistic view; no radical, essential evil was allowed within the well-ordered world created by a good God.

Deist writers also attacked the validity of sacred prophecies. Anthony Collins (1676–1729) declared in *A Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* that "to understand the Prophet as having the conception of the Virgin Mary and birth of her son Jesus literally and primarily in view, is a very great *absurdity*."¹³ Whereas Collins rejected the reliability of sacred prophecies, Thomas Woolston (c. 1668–1733) attacked the credibility of the New Testament miracles in *Discourses on the Miracles of Our Saviour*, claiming that they are full of absurdities: "the literal History of many of the Miracles of Jesus, as recorded by the Evangelists, does imply Absurdities, Improbability and Incredibility," and this, in fact, is "very dishonorable to the name of Christ."¹⁴

Another Deist attack on Christian orthodoxy concerned the "scandal of particularity" – the notion that God revealed himself only to a minute group of people and not to the rest of the world. This view entails, according to Edward, first Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1583–1648), that "the far greatest part of Mankind must be inevitably sentenced to Eternal Punishment," a view he thought "too rigid and severe to be consistent with the Attributes of the *Most Great and Good God*."¹⁵ Even the poet John Dryden (1631–1700), who attacked Deism in *Religio Laici*, wondered why, before Christ's coming, "the whole world, excepting only the Jewish nation, should lie under inevitable necessity of everlasting punishment, for want of that revelation which was confined to so small a spot of ground as that of Palestine."¹⁶

Together with most orthodox Christians, Jonathan Edwards believed that Deist views were destroying the foundations of Christianity, and he took upon himself a lifelong mission of refutation.¹⁷ He knew the ideas of the best-known Deists, such as Collins, Tindal, and Toland; besides, he could easily become acquainted with their views through books written by their opponents, such as John Leland, *View of the Principle Deistical Writers* (1745), Philip Skelton, *Deism Revealed* (1749), and Elisha Smith, *The Cure of Deism* (1736).¹⁸

Edwards rejected the Deists' elevation of reason above revelation as well as their view that reason alone can show humanity basic religious truths: "natural light" is never able to show how sinful humans can be reconciled to their Creator, and "the light of nature alone" cannot prove "that there is a future state." Hence assurance of salvation is impossible to find by reason alone.¹⁹ Indeed, reason is capable of knowing God, but only when the cognitive faculties are correctly disposed. God cannot be known by an "objective" reason that has not been enlivened by spiritual experience. Accordingly, Edwards attacked "Tindal's main argument against the need of any revelation," calling it an "empty, insipid kind of doctrine."²⁰ While the Deists assumed that reason can unveil the goodness and justice of God, thus inferring that religion is reasonable and nonmysterious, Edwards held that human reason after the Fall is very limited and incapable of possessing the saving knowledge of God, which comes only through knowledge of Christ as presented in scriptural revelation. Only through "the Christian revelation," he wrote, "the world has come to the knowledge of the only one true God."²¹ Since the "whole of Christian divinity depends on divine revelation," not only do "we stand in the greatest necessity of a divine revelation," but "it was most fit and proper" that God gave us such a revelation – Christ.²² Believing that reason is prevented by sin from leading human beings to the true God, Edwards was convinced that revelation is necessary to supply what fallen reason cannot.

Against Deists and other proponents of the "moral sense" inherent in human nature, Edwards insisted on the centrality of revelation to all true systems of morality. "He that sees the beauty of holiness, or true moral good, sees the greatest and most important thing in the world, which is the fullness of all things, without which all the world is empty, no better than nothing, yea, worse than nothing." Theological considerations, then, are inextricable from true morality, for "spiritual understanding primarily consists" in the sense "of the moral beauty of divine things." True morality "consists in the beauty of the moral perfections of God, which wonderfully shines forth in every step" of the "method of salvation": a method of delivering "us from sin and hell," and of bringing us to the "happiness which consists in the possession and enjoyment of moral good, in a way sweetly agreeing with God's moral perfections."²³ There is no such thing as morality without worship; worse, it is blasphemous because it flouts the one who founded and sustains true morality. "True virtue most essentially consists in benevolence to Being in general" or God; it is "that consent, propensity and union of heart to Being in general."²⁴ In sum, for Edwards the unregenerate reason is incapable of understanding the essence of true religion, and hence the nature and purpose of moral virtue which is inextricable from faith.²⁵

In the face of Deistic rejection of the Bible as written revelation, and the argument that God had already revealed in nature and reason all that human beings need to know – hence the special revelation in the Bible was not only unnecessary but patently fraudulent – Edwards declared that if "the New Testament ben't a true revelation of God, then God never has yet given the world any clear revelation of future state." "We must therefore suppose," he continues, "that God did design a further revelation than the Old Testament, because a future state was not clearly revealed by that."²⁶ In another place he argued that only the Christian revelation had been able to provide true knowledge of God, the world, the nature and destiny of human beings, sin and punishment, and redemption.²⁷

In contrast to the Deist claim that religion is not mystery, Edwards argued that even the "wiser heathen were sensible that the things of [the] gods are so high above us."²⁸ Mystery is to be expected in religion because religion is concerned with spiritual things that are not the objects of our senses. He thus denounced the Deist denial of mystery to religion, and he rejected the claim that morality is the essence of religion, thus subordinating religion to morality. For him morality and justice "are only for the advancement of the *great* business [religion], to assist mutually each other to it."²⁹

On the other hand, Edwards accepted the Deist premise that it would be unjust for God to withhold his revelation from the majority of the world – that is, Deists' argument about the "scandal of particularity." Accordingly, he used the notion of *prisca theologia* (ancient theology), an important tradition in apologetic theology that attempted to prove that vestiges of true religion (monotheism, the Trinity, *creatio ex nihilo*) were taught by certain non-Christian traditions, arguing that "the Heathen Philosophers had their notions of the unity of God, of the Trinity."³⁰ He recalled the claim of the second-century philosopher Numenius of Apamea: "What is Plato but Moses speaking in the Attic Language?"³¹ Knowledge of true religion among the heathen, therefore, is based on revelation and not, as the Deists argued, on the light of natural reason.

NATURAL PHILOSOPHY

Together with his attack on Deism, Edwards denounced the dominant scientific culture and imagination of enlightened Europe – mechanical philosophy, the doctrine that all natural phenomena can be explained and understood by the mere mechanics of matter and motion. He attempted to provide a philosophical and theological alternative to the mechanistic explanation of the essential nature of reality, an alternative that would reconstitute the glory of God's absolute sovereignty, power, and will within creation.

This can be seen in a long series of writings on natural philosophy – most notably “Of Being” (1722), “Of Atoms” (1722), and “The Mind” (1724), which reveal Edwards’s knowledge of the works of mechanical philosophers such as Robert Boyle (1627–91) and Isaac Newton (1643–1727), and present his attempt to construct a theology or a typology of nature in opposition to mechanical natural philosophy.³²

The mechanization of the natural world was an important feature of late seventeenth-century science. Its “basic postulate was that nature operates according to mechanical principles, the regularity of which can be expressed in the form of natural laws.”³³ Mechanical philosophers conceived of the world as a huge machine running like the work of a clock according to abstract mechanical laws of nature. Boyle said that nature is a “compounded machine,”³⁴ and the “whole universe” is “but a great Automaton, or self-moving engine, wherein all things are performed by the bare motion (or rest), the size, the shape, and the situation, or texture of the parts of the universal matter it consists of.”³⁵ Likewise, Newton believed that a true understanding of the phenomena of nature is based upon “rational mechanics,” or “reasoning from mechanical principles” on all “the phenomena of Nature,” which are formulated according to “mathematical principles.”³⁶

The mechanization of the natural world led to the mechanization of God’s providential activity in the world. Once set in motion by God, the course of nature and the phenomena of the world are the product of mere mechanical laws and no longer manifest the divine immanence. “[T]he phenomena of the world,” wrote Boyle, “are physically produced by the mechanical affections of the part of matter, and what they operate upon one another according to mechanical laws.”³⁷ God’s providential scheme was confined mainly to the establishment and maintenance of the general, external laws of nature that regulate the world phenomena. Accordingly, Newton’s God is a cosmic legislator, “a Universal Ruler,”³⁸ who is “an agent acting constantly according to certain laws.”³⁹ With the mechanization of the natural world, the notion of God’s relationship to it changed dramatically: “The sovereign Redeemer of Luther and Calvin became,” in scientific thought, “the sovereign Ruler of the world machine.”⁴⁰ Newton’s God was first and foremost “the *kosmokrator*, ruler over everything,”⁴¹ or “a ‘universal ruler’ (*pantokrator*),”⁴² and not, as in classical and medieval thought, a God whose symbolic presence was manifested in the nature and harmony of creation. For him, “only a God of true and supreme dominion is a supreme and true God,” and this “at the expense of God’s love and, apparently, God’s intellect.”⁴³

Fully aware of the ramifications inherent in the premises of mechanical philosophy as they affected the traditional Christian dialectic of God’s transcendence and immanence, Edwards recognized that the new scientific

interpretation was leading increasingly to a separation between the order of grace and the order of nature, between God and the world, and was thus incompatible with traditional Christian belief. He was alarmed by the mechanistic conception of the world of nature as a self-contained and independent reality, a self-inclusive machine running by itself according to abstract, universal laws of nature, freed from subordination to God’s dominion and not affected by his unceasingly watchful eyes. And with great dismay, Edwards observed that mechanical philosophy’s notion of a homogeneous, uniform and symmetrical, one-dimensional world of nature not only deprived created order of any teleological ends and purposes, but stipulated that nature could no longer manifest the presence of God.

In response, Edwards constructed his own theology of nature, or typology, interpreting the physical world as a representation or a “shadow” of the spiritual one that celebrates God’s glory and sovereignty as they are evidenced in the coherence and beauty, order and harmony, of world phenomena. His goal was to prove God’s existence in his majesty and glory within the created world. Hence he attacked mechanical philosophy, claiming “there is no such thing as mechanism” if that word meant that “bodies act each upon other, purely and properly by themselves,” because “the very being, and the manner of being, and the whole of bodies depends immediately on the divine power.”⁴⁴ He appropriated the atomic doctrine of the dominant mechanical philosophy of his time but Christianized it, arguing that God’s infinite power is responsible for holding the “atoms together.” Hence, the very framework of the material universe is evidence of God’s omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniactivity: “the very being, and the manner of being, and the whole of bodies depends immediately on the divine power.”⁴⁵ Further, claiming that every “atom in the universe is managed by Christ so as to be most to the advantage of the Christian,” he reestablished God’s direct and intimate relation with the world.⁴⁶ Likewise he rejected the mechanistic understanding of the concept of “natural laws,” because these laws, setting up a mediating sphere between God and his creation, restricted God’s infinite power and limited divine immanence within the phenomena of the world. What “we call the laws of nature” are only “the stated methods of God’s acting with respect to bodies.”⁴⁷ Accordingly, he denounced the mechanical philosophers’ claim that God “himself, in common with his creatures,” is “subject in his acting to the same laws with inferior beings,” thus dethroning God from his place as “the head of the universe” and “the foundation and first spring of all.”⁴⁸

In “The Mind,” Edwards formulated his idealistic phenomenalism: “the world, i.e. the material universe, exists nowhere but in the mind,” and, given that “all material existence is only idea,” the “world therefore is an ideal one.”⁴⁹ His main goal was to show that the essence of reality is a matter of

relationship between God and the created order. Accordingly, the principle underlying his theological teleology, the order of being inherent in the structure of the universe, was the concept of "Excellency." Edwards defined this as the "consent of being to being, or being's consent to entity," which in turn defined the relationship within the hierarchy of spirits according to their consent to the supreme being, God. "So far as a thing consents to being in general," Edwards wrote, "so far it consents to him," hence "the more perfect created spirits are, the nearer do they come to their creator in this regard." Seeing that "the more the consent is, and the more extensive, the greater is the excellency," therefore in "the order of beings in the natural world, the more excellent and noble any being is, the more visible and immediate hand of God is there in bringing them into being" with "the most noble of all," the "soul of man."⁵⁰

In undertaking to provide an alternative view of the essence of reality that would lead eventually to the reenchantment of the world, Edwards's ultimate goal was the demonstration of the infinite power of God's absolute sovereignty in both the "order of nature" and the "order of time."⁵¹ His interpretation of natural phenomena therefore constituted a radical departure from the prevalent mechanical philosophy. Believing that "the corporeal world is to no advantage but to the spiritual," he claimed that "to find out the reasons of things in natural philosophy is only to find out the proportion of God's acting."⁵² In this venture of the redefining of the world, Edwards was not alone in the British world, as can be seen in the close affinities between his thought and that of other anti-Newtonians at that time, such as George Berkeley (1685–1753), William Blake (1757–1827), and others, who were opposed to distancing God from the phenomena of nature or detaching the order of grace from the order of nature, as Newton's universal active principles appeared to do.

HISTORY

The same drive to uphold traditional religious belief informs Edwards's contribution to historical thought. His philosophy of history took shape, in part, in opposition to intellectual developments in the early modern European period, and specifically to the new modes of historical thought that were leading to the exclusion of theistic considerations from the realm of history.⁵³ The view that the course of history is based exclusively on God's redemptive activity was developed by Edwards as a response to the Enlightenment narratives that rejected the Christian sense of time and vision of history. "Shall we prize a history that gives us a clear account of some great earthly prince or mighty warrior, as of Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar,

or the duke of Marlborough," asked Edwards, "and shall we not prize the history that God has given us of the glorious kingdom of his son, Jesus Christ, the prince and savior of the world?"⁵⁴ Against the de-Christianization and de-divinization of the historical process, Edwards sought the reenthronement of God as the sole author and lord of history.

The "enlightened age" posed grave implications for traditional Christian thought. It signified an entirely new attitude toward history, stressing human autonomy and freedom in determining its course and progress. Enlightenment historians refused "to recognize an absolutely supernatural or an absolutely super-historical sphere," and attempted to free historical thought "from the bonds of Scripture dogmatically interpreted and of the orthodoxy of the preceding centuries."⁵⁵ Instead of ordering the structure of history on the dimension of "sacred time," or the operation of divine providence, Enlightenment historical narratives were based on secular, historical time.⁵⁶ Henry St. John, Lord Bolingbroke (1678–1751), Voltaire (1694–1778), David Hume (1711–76), and Edward Gibbon (1737–94), to name only a few, strove to "liberate history writing from its subservience to theology" and to free it from the theological view that conceived "the course of human history as the realization of a divine plan."⁵⁷ Instead of seeing the historical process as contingent on a metaphysical reality beyond and above it, Enlightenment historians gave their highest attention to human beings' actions and deeds.

No longer considered as the narrative of a God-given providential plan, the historical realm came to be defined as a space of time intended for the realization of the possibilities and abilities inherent in the nature of human beings. Enlightenment historians viewed mankind as "advancing steadily from primitive barbarism to reason and virtue and civilization."⁵⁸ In place of the religious vision of history as the drama of human salvation and redemption that would be realized *beyond* history, historical thought in the age of Enlightenment developed the concept of "progress," or the notion of an immanent human advance based on the belief that utopian visions regarding human freedom and happiness could be fulfilled *within* history. *Historia Humana* gradually replaced salvation history in the European mind. This involved not only the detachment of grace from time, redemption from history, and divine agency from temporal events, but ultimately the rejection of the Christian historical worldview.

To Enlightenment historians, the uses of studying history were primarily political, social, and educational, and much less theological and religious. Lord Bolingbroke claimed: "We ought always to keep in mind, that history is philosophy teaching by examples how to conduct ourselves in all the situations of private and public life."⁵⁹ Hume argued that history's main use

is to reveal the progress of "human society" from "its infancy . . . towards arts and sciences."⁶⁰ *Historia Humana*, the annals of human institutions, civil society, laws, manners, nations, and so on, in contrast to the sacred, became the enterprise of Enlightenment historians. The chief use of "history," said Hume, is "to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature, by showing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations," enabling us to "become acquainted with the regular springs of human action and behaviour."⁶¹

Even more serious for traditional religious thought and belief were the Enlightenment historians' denunciations of the Christian interpretation of history. Hume wrote that religion "has contributed to render CHRISTENDOM the scene of religious wars and divisions. Religions," including Christianity, "arise in ages totally ignorant and barbarous" and "consist mostly of traditional tales and fictions."⁶² Also grave for the traditional Christian narrative of history was the threat to the authority of the Bible as an historical source. Bolingbroke directed a major assault on sacred ecclesiastical history. The "historical part" of the "Old Testament," he wrote, "must be reputed insufficient" to the study of history "by every candid and impartial man." Not only is the Bible an insufficient and unreliable source, but "history has been purposely and systematically falsified in all ages" by church historians. Instead of providing historical truths, the Christian interpretation of history has led to the "abuse of history."⁶³

Edwards owned and read many works by Enlightenment historians, among them Pierre Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1702), Bolingbroke's *Remarks on the History of England* (1731) and *Letters on the Study and Use of History* (1752), Hume's *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (1742), and Samuel Pufendorf's *An Introduction to the History of the Principal Kingdoms and States of Europe* (1702). Aware of these modes of European historical thought, and in response to them, Edwards formulated his own philosophy of salvation history; its fullest and most systematic exposition is found in the thirty sermons on the *History of the Work of Redemption* (1739).⁶⁴

Against the Enlightenment historians' new modes of historical, secular time that denied any theistic interpretation of the historical process, Edwards viewed history as lying exclusively in the mind of omniscient God. Taking God as the sole author of history, he argued that divine providence constructed history as a special dimension of sacred, redemptive time designed solely for accomplishing God's work of redemption, the "rise and continued progress of the dispensations of grace towards fallen mankind."⁶⁵ The historical process therefore should be understood from the perspective of its maker and author. In this sacred, redemptive context, the "pourings out of the Spirit" and its historical manifestations in the form of revivals

and awakenings constitute the ultimate mark of divine agency in the order of time: "from the fall of man to this day wherein we live the Work of Redemption in its effects has mainly been carried on by remarkable pourings out of the Spirit of God" at "special seasons of mercy," or revivals, such as during the age of the apostles or the Protestant Reformation.⁶⁶ Religious awakening is the essence of providential history and the main manifestation of divine agency in worldly time.

Edwards's historical narrative therefore deals primarily with the outpouring of the Spirit of God in "dispensations of providence" and, correspondingly, with its historical manifestations in the form of decisive periods of awakenings throughout history.⁶⁷ His aim was to demonstrate that the fate of human beings cannot be separated from divine action in time. Given that the whole course and progress of history are based on the effusion of the Spirit as manifested in periods of decisive revivals, history is God's grand "theater" because his transcendent ends determine the drama of human history on earth. Edwards thus defined history as a sacred space of time destined from eternity for God's own self-glorification – the display of the deity's excellence in creation as evidenced in his work of redemption; hence human beings' existence as well as their history are totally dependent on God. Such was Edwards's reply to the exclusion of theistic considerations from the realm of time and history by Enlightenment historians.⁶⁸

ETHICS AND MORALS

Edwards's long involvement with issues of ethics and morals, apparent in his various "ethical writings," such as *Charity and Its Fruits* (1738), *Concerning the End for Which God Created the World* (1755), and *The Nature of True Virtue* (1755), may be understood in the wider ideological context of early modern history and the "Enlightenment project," or its "new science of morals," which presented a contrast to Christian teaching. The first half of the eighteenth century witnessed an attempt on the part of Enlightenment thinkers to establish new concepts of moral theory. Chief among these was the theory of a "moral sense," the *sensus communis* of classical thought. Claiming that the moral sense is the faculty by which we distinguish between right and wrong, writers such as Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746) and David Hume, as well as other members of the British School of Moral Sense, argued that it is possible to have knowledge of good and evil without, and prior to, knowledge of God. The main assumption behind this conception of ethics and morals was the belief that human beings can know from within themselves, without reliance on traditional sources of religious authority, what God intends and expects of them as moral creatures.

The term "moral sense" was first suggested by Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713), in *An Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit* (1699) and in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711). In these works he appealed to psychological experience as a foundation for morality, attributing to a moral sense our ability "to be capable of Virtue, and to have a Sense of Right and Wrong," to distinguish between good and evil, virtue and vice.⁶⁹ This sense, he believed, along with our common affection for virtue, accounts for the possibility of morality.

Francis Hutcheson, Shaftesbury's principal follower, a professor of moral theology at Glasgow, argued in his *An Inquiry Concerning the Original of Our Ideas of Virtue or Moral Good* (1725) that human beings have disinterested motives, namely, they can act for the sake of the good of others and not merely for their self-advantage. Since "no love to rational Agents can proceed from Self Interest, every action must be disinterested, as far as it flows from Love to rational Agents." This disinterested motive, which he terms "Benevolence, or Love" – the quality of being concerned about others for their own sake – constitutes "the universal Foundation" of the "Moral Sense."⁷⁰

The same endeavor to ground morality exclusively in the benevolence of human nature appears also in Hume's moral philosophy. For him, as with Hutcheson, morality is an entirely human affair based on human nature and not on a divine will. "[M]orality," he claimed, "is nothing in the abstract nature of things, but is entirely relative to the sentiment or mental taste of each particular being."⁷¹ Believing that ethics and religion were separate subjects of inquiry, Hume attempted to provide an analysis of moral principles without connection to religion, defining "virtue as personal merit, or what is useful and agreeable to ourselves and to others."⁷²

Edwards knew many works by Enlightenment moral theorists, including Shaftesbury's *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711), Hutcheson's *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725) and *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections with Illustration on the Moral Sense* (1728), as well as Hume's, *A Treatise on Human Nature* (1739), *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), and *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751). In these works he could see that the new theories of ethics were leading to the detachment of the moral system from God. The Enlightenment debate on moral philosophy, especially its theory of innate moral sense, thus contained serious implications for Christian ethics. In response, Edwards declared that it is "evident that true virtue must chiefly consist in love to God," and that "all true virtue" is based on "love of Being, and the qualities and acts which arise from it."⁷³ Since the essence of "true virtue" is "benevolence to being in general," or

God, there is no "true virtue without SUPREME LOVE TO GOD and making God our supreme end."⁷⁴

Edwards devoted much time and energy to refuting the moral sense theory because he would not accept a theory of morals or virtue based exclusively on human nature and independent of God, who exercises "absolute and universal dominion" over the created order: "[T]he whole universe, including all creatures animate and inanimate, in all its actings, proceedings, revolutions, and entire series of events, should proceed from a regard and with a view to God, as the supreme and last end of all."⁷⁵ Thus in *Charity and Its Fruits*, preached in 1734 and 1735, he asserted that from "love to God springs love to man"; hence without "love to God there can be no true honor," or virtue.⁷⁶ Against the attempts by Enlightenment writers to base ethics and morals on secular and naturalistic foundations, Edwards declared that the gracious affections stand above and beyond the natural affections of which all are capable, and true virtue stands above and beyond the disinterested benevolence that marks the ultimate achievement of natural man. He wrote that "what our modern philosophers call natural Moral Taste is a different thing from virtue," because "a supreme regard to the Deity is essential to true virtue."⁷⁷

In *Freedom of the Will* (1754), Edwards attacked the Arminians' and Deists' "grand article concerning *the freedom of the will requisite to moral agency*," the belief that absolute self-determination of the will is necessary for human liberty and moral virtue. Since "every event" in the physical as well as the moral world "must be ordered by God," the "liberty of moral agents does not consist in self-determining power." Accordingly, in this work he wished to demonstrate that "God's moral government over mankind, his treating them as moral agents," is not "inconsistent with a determining disposal of all events." Human beings must do as they will, in accordance with their fallen nature, and they have liberty only in the sense that nothing prevents them from doing what they will in accordance with their nature. But "nothing in the state or acts of the will of man is contingent," for "every event of this kind is necessary." God's foreknowledge eliminates the possibility of contingency in the world, for contingency is the antithesis of God's unlimited prescience. Given that "the power of volition" belongs only to "the man or the soul," there is no such thing as "freedom of the will."⁷⁸ That freedom is incompatible with the individual's necessary willing of what he or she can will in accordance with a nature of self already determined. Edwards therefore attacked the "doctrine of self-determining will, as the ground of all moral good and evil," because it "tends to prevent any proper exercise of faith in God and Christ, in the affair of our salvation, as it tends to prevent all dependence upon them."⁷⁹

Likewise, against the Enlightenment notion of human beings as fundamentally rational, moral, and benevolent, Edwards's *Original Sin* (1758) provided "a *general defense* of that great important doctrine" of original sin. This doctrine proclaims both the depravity of the human heart and the imputation of Adam's first sin to his posterity. All of Adam's posterity inherit the existential state of being "exposed, and justly so, to the sorrows of this life, to temporal death, and eternal ruin, unless saved by grace." But corruption of humankind cannot be accounted for by considering the sin of each individual separately. It is essential to the human condition and is based on "the *arbitrary* constitution of the Creator" in creation. Thus, in response to the Enlightenment writers' belief in human moral sense, Edwards declared that "we are by nature, *companions* in a miserable helpless condition," namely, human depravity.⁸⁰

During the eighteenth century, the controversy over human depravity signified an important struggle about the nature of human beings and their potentialities. As a result, the emphasis during the age of Enlightenment on human beings as fundamentally rational, morally and benevolently inclined, endangered the Christian doctrine of original sin. Edwards wrote *Original Sin* against, among others, John Taylor (1694–1761), a Presbyterian minister who published *The Scripture-Doctrine of Original Sin* in 1740, accusing Calvinism of turning God into a monster. Taylor wrote, "[P]ray consider seriously what a God He must be who can be displeased with and curse His innocent creatures even before they have a being."⁸¹ Further, Taylor argued that virtue and holiness result from the free and right choices of human beings. Among respondents to Taylor were John Wesley, who in *The Doctrine of Original Sin* (1757) charged Taylor with overthrowing the foundations of primitive, scriptural Christianity, and Jonathan Edwards, who argued that if we do not posit universal depravity, we cannot explain how every individual does, in fact, freely choose what is evil.

Finally, in *The Nature of True Virtue*, Edwards replied directly to the contemporary "controversies and variety of opinions" about "the nature of true virtue." His aim was to define the disposition that distinguished the godly, claiming that true "virtue most essentially consists in benevolence to Being in general." A true system of morals and ethics is therefore inseparable from religion because the former is grounded on the latter; religion is the true foundation and only source of all virtue. Since "true virtue must chiefly consist in love to God, the Being of beings," continues Edwards, "he that has true virtue, consisting in benevolence to Being in general [or God], and in that complacency in virtue, or moral beauty, and benevolence to virtuous being, must necessarily have a supreme love to God, both of benevolence and complacency." Against Hutcheson's and Hume's separation of morals

and religion, Edwards claimed that virtue is by necessity grounded on God since the deity "is the head of the universal system of existence." Hence "nothing is of the nature of true virtue, in which God is not the *first* and the *last*."⁸²

Edwards was fully aware of the grave implications of the Enlightenment's new theories of ethics and morals for the Christian faith. "[U]nless we will be atheists," he declared, "we must allow that true virtue does primarily and most essentially consist in a supreme love to God." Those who oppose this assertion deny that "God maintains a moral kingdom in the world." Morality, then, cannot be separated from God: "a virtuous love in *created* beings, *one to another*, is dependent on, and derived from love to God." Moreover, the foundation of morality cannot be separated from the theological teleology of order inherent in the universe: "they are good moral agents whose temper of mind or propensity of heart is agreeable to the *end* for which God made moral agents." The "last end for which God has made moral agents must be the last end for which God has made all things: it being evident that the moral world is the end of the rest of the world; the inanimate and unintelligent world being made for the rational and moral world."⁸³

In the English Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, Edwards's views, strongly opposed to the dominant philosophy of Locke, Newton, Hume, and the Deists, illustrate the expiring power of Calvinism. But in terms of the formation of American culture, his attacks on Enlightenment secular modes of thought helped to create a well-defined American Protestant culture.⁸⁴ More specifically, Edwards's rejection of the British school of "moral sense" was incorporated, adopted, and diffused by the New Divinity School in New England and, in fact, was its hallmark during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Likewise, his reaction to the Enlightenment narratives of history led to the development of a singular evangelical historiography, which, by placing revival at the center of salvation history, conditioned many generations of Protestants in America to see religious awakening as the essence of divine agency in time and history.

Notes

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21. "Miscell." 519, WJE, 18:64.
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