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THE AFFECTIONS AND THE HUMAN PERSON: EDWARDS ON RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Yale philosopher John E. Smith once observed that all of Jonathan Edwards' thought can be considered "one magnificent answer" to the question: What is true religion?[1] We would add that Edwards' answer to that question invariably involved what he called the "affections," since they lay at the heart of his theological anthropology. The human person for Edwards was a bundle of affections that determine nearly everything that person feels, thinks and does. Therefore no treatment of his theology can escape the question of what he meant by the affections, and the role that the affections play in religious experience. This paper will explore first the importance of the affections for Edwards, then his conception of their relation to the human person and true religion, and finally his estimation of how to evaluate them.

Importance and Nature of the Affections

Near the beginning of *Religious Affections* Edwards portrays the affections as "springs of motion" for all forms of human activity:

> Such is man's nature, that he is very inactive, any otherwise than he is influenced by some affection, either love or hatred, desire, hope, fear or

[1] John E. Smith, "Editor's Introduction," WJE 2:2.

> 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 . . . take away all love and hatred, all hope and fear, all anger, zeal and affectionate desire, and the world would be, in a great measure, motionless and dead, there would be no such thing as activity amongst mankind, or any earnest pursuit whatsoever. 'Tis affection that engages the covetous man . . . 'tis the affections also that actuate the voluptuous man . . . so in religious matters, the *spring of their actions* are very much religious affections: he that has doctrinal knowledge and speculation only, without affection, never is a engaged in the business of religion.[2]

Several things are worth noting here. Human society is a bustling affair, brimming with aspiration and endeavor. As on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, everyone is going somewhere. Yet just below the surface are the affections that motivate these movements. Affections are both good and bad, non-religious and religious. Religious affections do not function differently from non-religious affections, but have different objects. So while everyday affections such as the desires for wealth and sensual pleasure have money and sensory gratification as their objects, religious affections seek God and spiritual things.

Furthermore, Edwards argues that genuine religion is always a matter of the affections. Mere "doctrinal knowledge and speculation" are not deep and strong enough to constitute affections and therefore genuine religion. They are "mere actings of the will and inclination of the soul." Only if they are "vigorous and lively" in their exercise do they rise to the level of "religious affections." There are "many actings of the will and inclination, that are not so commonly called affections" since they are merely weak preferences—such as preferring blueberry to strawberry jam. Such preferences raise "us little above a state of indifference." But religious *affections* involve "a fervent, vigorous engagement of the heart in religion" that display themselves in love for God with all the heart and soul. He compared "the business of religion," which is moved by affections, to "running, wrestling or agonizing for a great prize or crown, and fighting with strong enemies that seek our lives, and warring as those that by violence take a city or kingdom." Thus Edwards defined affections as "the more vigorous and sensible exercises of the inclination and will of the soul."[3]

By "soul" Edwards meant the confluence of two faculties—the "understanding" that perceives and judges, and the "inclination or will" that moves the human

[2] WJE 2:101; emph. added.
[3] WJE 2:101, 97, 99-100, 96.

self toward or away from things in liking and disliking, loving and hating, approving and rejecting. This brief definition of the affections rooted in the faculties of the soul is often misunderstood in two related ways: commentators either ignore the intellectual component or reduce the affections to "emotions," thus missing Edwards' insistence on the unity of the human person. Let us treat these problems one by one.

First, note the intellectual component. For Edwards the affections move the soul, which means they move the mind as well as the will. In the affections of true religion, the mind is "enlightened, rightly and spiritually, to understand or apprehend divine things." True religion will always have "*knowledge* of the loveliness of divine things."[4] Holy affections, he noted, "are not heat without light,"[5] for they arise from affections that are a unity of mind and inclination in the soul. If the soul is warmed toward God, it will be drawn to certain *understandings* of God. All inclination already involves perception of the mind because of the unity of the soul and self. Edwards rejected all dichotomies that set the mind against the heart—even while such dichotomies were common during the Great Awakening debates. Opponents of the Awakening, such as Charles Chauncy, argued that revival preachers had merely stirred up "passions," and that true religion brought the self under the control of reason rather than emotion. Radical revivalists, such as James Davenport, reveled in intense emotions and derogated the intellect.[6] But Edwards' position refused the dichotomies of either side, insisting on a soul whose affections shape not only feelings and choices but also the mind. By his lights, an idea is not only intellectual but also has affective content. Say the word "fire," and while for some it suggests a delightful fireside encounter with a loved one, for others it painfully recalls the loss of a home. Conversely, all affections or inclinations are united to intellectual conceptions: "The heart cannot be set upon an object of which there is no idea in the understanding."[7] This union of the intellect with the heart was missed by most in the revival debates. Many pro-revivalists assumed that religion was all about feelings and had nothing to do with the mind. "Old Lights" claimed to be in favor of reason and against emotion and revival, while "New Lights" often criticized reason while championing emotion and revival. Few grasped the subtlety of Edwards' position.

Both sides then, and many scholars since, have wrongly assumed that Edwards' affections were the same thing as "emotions." But emotions for Edwards

[4] WJE 2:266, 271; emph. added.
[5] WJE 2:266.
[6] WJE 4:60. See also WJE 4:51-52, 60-65, 79-83.
[7] WJE 2:266, 271 (emph. added); WJE 22:88.

were only one dimension of human experience shaped by affections, along with thinking and choosing. Edwards argued that true religious affections sometimes choose *against* emotional feeling, such as when Jesus chose not to yield to his feelings of fear in the Garden of Gethsemane. When "passions" overwhelm one's better judgment, such as in a fit of rage, emotions are in fact opposed to true religious affections. Furthermore, Edwards always linked affections to an object, while emotions may or may not have an object. In current English usage, the statement "I am emotional" need not imply an object of emotion. But the assertion "I am affectionate" raises the question, toward what or whom?

At the center of all Edwards' thinking about affections and religious experience was his conviction of the unity of the human person. He rejected the threefold distinction of mind, will and emotions that was common in nineteenth- and twentieth-century discussions of human psychology and in outline went back to Plato. Edwards declared that the will and affections "are not two faculties," but different expressions of the inclination that already has intellectual judgment contained within it.[8] As we just saw, he recognized that there are times when one expression seems to conflict with the other, as when the mind must choose against the feelings. Critics then and since have proposed the will as a mediator between the two (mind and emotions). Edwards replied to his contemporaries that such a mediating will is a self-determining power that is logically incoherent and self-contradictory, as he argued in *Freedom of the Will*. The will, he noted, cannot determine itself. A person has a will, but one's will itself does not have a will. Ultimately all faculties cohere with one another within the unity of the human self. It must be conceded, however, that although Edwards lists the understanding as the first in the faculties of the soul, he says little concerning its nature or function. This could be because he thought its status less problematic than that of the other faculties. It is also apparent that his preoccupation with the mind, will and affections—indeed, his authorship of volumes like *Freedom of the Will*, *Religious Affections*, and *Original Sin*—situates him in an Augustinian-voluntarist tradition that characterized the human self more in terms of its desires and choices than its thoughts and concepts.

Even the two-fold distinction of understanding and inclination tends to break down in the course of Edwards' discussion in *Religious Affections*. What one calls mind or understanding is the human self in one mode of operation, while inclination is another mode. Because both understanding and inclination are expressions of the total human self, the distinction between them is more analytical than

[8] WJE 2:97.

actual. They are not parts of the soul or self, as is commonly imagined. The inclination's affections include an intellectual dimension, while the mind's thoughts include an affective dimension. In this way the two faculties are interlocking in their operations. It is therefore a basic mistake to interpret Edwards in terms of any dichotomy of intellect versus affect, or head versus heart—although some interpreters have wanted to claim him for one side or the other.

If the human self was basically unitary for Edwards, so were the affections in one sense. That is, the godly affections were all rooted in the basic affection of love. To be sure, Edwards singled out for discussion in *Religious Affections* a variety of affections including fear, hope, love, hatred, desire, joy, sorrow, compassion and zeal. But the affection that overshadows the rest is love, also called charity. In *Charity and Its Fruits* love is "the sum of all virtue," and is opposed to envy, pride, selfishness, and censoriousness. But love is not only the root of the virtues for Edwards; it is also, in some sense, the root of all godly affections and actions. One recalls Augustine's statement in *City of God* that each person's love is the "gravity" that determines whether a person rises or falls. For Edwards, the opposite of love is not hatred but indifference. A "hard heart," he wrote, is an "unaffected heart."[9] He interpreted affections in all their diversity as so many modifications of love arising from diverse circumstances in which love is expressed:

> From love arises hatred of those things which are contrary to what we love, or which oppose and thwart us in those things that we delight in: and from the various exercises of love and hatred, according to the circumstances of the objects of those affections, as present or absent, certain or uncertain, probable or improbable, arise all those other affections of desire, hope, fear, joy, grief, gratitude, anger, etc.[10]

Edwards spoke of a "counterfeit love" which produces "other false affections" —an idea reminiscent of Augustine's distinction between charity and concupiscence, two "loves" with different destinations, one driving some toward the City of Man and the other propelling others toward the City of God.[11]

Scrutinizing the Affections

Edwards did not merely delineate the affections and explain how they function in the human person. As Smith has put it, he proceeded to subject Protestantism's sacred domain—the inner life—to public tests. Edwards believed piety needed to

[9] WJE 2:102-08; WJE 8:129, 218-92; Augustine, *City of God* 11.23; WJE 2:117.
[10] WJE 2:108.
[11] WJE 2:150.

be evaluated by a kind of rational scrutiny. This was for the purpose of discriminating true religion from hypocrisy and self-deception. He recognized that this is a difficult task, even for a pastor obligated to make decisions regarding other persons' spiritual condition. Only God, said Edwards, can fathom a human soul. Thus he writes that "it was never God's design to give us any rules by which we may certainly know, who of our fellow professors are his, and to make a full and clear separation between sheep and goats: but that on the contrary, it was God's design to reserve this to himself, as his prerogative." A recently-published text, "Directions for Judging of Persons' Experiences," shows Edwards searching for principles to evaluate members of his flock: "See to it: That the operation be much upon the will or heart, not on the imagination. . . . That the trouble of mind be reasonable. . . . That they have not only pretended convictions of sin; but a proper mourning for sin.[12] During his later years, Edwards became skeptical about definitive judgments on one's own or others' spiritual condition. Hypocrites mimicked saints, and saints resembled hypocrites. The heart was deceptive, both to others and to itself.

In *Religious Affections* the overriding sign of genuine religion is "holy practice," which lies in the realm of action rather than perception or sensibility. The only set of affections that produces the habit of holy practice is the cluster collectively titled the "new sense of the heart." This is the "disposition" or habit which the Spirit "infuses" to enable saints to see God's infinite beauty and glory. It is a "sweet idea," the "joy of joys," a sweet and ravishing "view of the moral excellency of divine things." This sight alone makes all the other divine attributes glorious and lovely. It is a taste that is diverse from all other sensations, as different as the taste of honey is from the mere intellectual idea of it. It is an "intuitive knowledge" of the supreme beauty and sweetness of the holiness and moral perfection of divine things. This beauty of holiness, Edwards proclaimed, is the most important thing in the world, the divinity of divinity, without which God would be an infinite evil, and apart from which it would be better if we had not been born and there had been no being at all. These were the extravagant claims made by Edwards for what has been called the most original idea in all of his theology.[13]

This "sense of the heart" is treated at greater length in *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford UP, Sept. 2011, chs. 10, 24), but it is important here to note the scholarly debate over the relationship of this "sense" to everyday perceptions. One the one side are those like Paul Helm who highlight the discontinuity between the

[12] WJE 2:43, 193; WJE 21:522-24.

[13] WJE 2:242, 253, 257, 260, 206, 259, 272-73, 298; John E. Smith, "Editor's Introduction," in WJE 2:30.

new sense and all other human experiences.[14] Since Edwards compares the new sense to Locke's "new simple idea"—an idea, like heat or wetness, that cannot be understood without a corresponding experience—these scholars maintain that the new sense has no connection to ordinary sense perception and implies a kind of sixth sense.[15] On the other side are those such as Perry Miller who note that Edwards denied that the new sense set aside the functioning of the natural senses. They interpret the "new sense" not as a sixth sense or vision of another world but as a deeper vision of the present world.[16] Our position is that Edwards' new sense involved an interplay of natural and gracious experience. *Pace* Miller, the experience of conversion is foundational to Edwards' religious epistemology. Believers are able to perceive a holy beauty in God that is invisible to nonbelievers, and in this sense believers and nonbelievers live in two different universes. Subsequent to regeneration, the believer comes to appreciate even the beauties of the natural world in new ways. While Emerson and Schleiermacher held that a deeper vision was accessible to all human beings, Edwards made this vision dependent on a prior operation of divine grace. *Pace* Helm, however, the mental breakthrough of grace, or "divine and supernatural light," operates in and through the natural sense faculties, and so grace does not destroy or bypass nature but perfects it. The "new sense" is not an epistemological quirk, detached from the rest of human life. Those who undergo regeneration find that this one experience unlocks the meaning of all human experience, and sheds light on all of life. Thus Edwards' "new sense" is a creative synthesis of Puritan and Enlightenment ideas, melding the discontinuities of grace with the continuities of human nature. Moreover the "new sense" became a basis for Edwards to judge between gracious and natural experiences in the midst of the eighteenth-century religious awakenings.

The argument of *Religious Affections* suggests that individuals can examine themselves to see if they delight in this divine beauty for its own sake. It may be a hard test, but for Edwards it was this vision, issuing in a disposition given to Christian practice (by which he meant things such as humility, forgiveness, mercy, fear of God, balance among the virtues, and hunger for more of God), that yields decisive evidence of grace. *Religious Affections* also outlines a set of phenomena that are unreliable as signs of grace. Some persons, for example, become convinced of God's favor because verses of Scripture or other words related to Jesus

[14] Paul Helm, "John Locke and Jonathan Edwards: A Reconsideration," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 7 (1969), 51-61.

[15] WJE 2:205.

[16] Perry Miller, "Jonathan Edwards and the Sense of the Heart," *Harvard Theological Review* 41 (1948), 123-45.

Christ suddenly come to mind. Another unreliable or "no certain" sign is the presence of "very great" or "raised high" affections. Edwards points to the Israelites at the Red Sea who sang God's praises but then "tested the Lord" by forgetting his work for them and crying out to go back to Egypt.[17] Other uncertain signs are great effects on the body, fluency in talking about religious things, spiritual phenomena arising without effort, the appearance of love, many different kinds of affections, a certain order in the affections, spending much time in religious duties, mouths full of praises, assurance of salvation, and good impressions among the godly about the spiritual state of a person. All of these are common among hypocrites, who also exhibit excessive confidence in themselves, a prideful and superior spirit, censorious or judgmental attitudes toward others, and a tendency toward self-satisfaction.[18]

The Role of the Imagination

Edwards also discussed the role of the human imagination in religious experience. Early in his career he thought God sometimes used the human imagination—for example, when people had visions and sensed God speaking to them. In *Distinguishing Marks*–a Yale commencement address in 1741—he argued that these phenomena are not antithetical to true religion: "That persons have many impressions on their imaginations, don't prove that they have nothing else." When the Holy Spirit stirs the human mind and heart, the imagination is liable to be influenced, and "such is our nature that we can't think of things invisible, without a degree of imagination." He stressed the positive functions of imagination: "It appears to manifest in many instances I have been acquainted with, that God has really made use of this faculty [of imagination] to truly divine purposes; especially in some that are more ignorant." He concluded that the "holy frame and sense" of these people at these times were from God, but "the imaginations that attend it are but accidental" and therefore often mixed with confusion and falsehood.[19] Five years later in *Religious Affections* Edwards was more jaded. All "imaginary sights of God and Christ and heaven, all supposed witnessing of the Spirit, and testimonies of the love of God by immediate inward suggestion; and all impressions of future events, and immediate revelations of any secret facts whatsoever . . . all interpretations of the mystical meaning of Scripture, by supposed immediate revelation" are simply "impressions in the head" and evidence of "false religion." These "impressions on the imagination" are symptoms of the false religion seen in

[17] WJE 2:127-30.
[18] WJE 2:142-45, 220, 127-90.
[19] WJE 4:235-38.

heretical groups such as the Gnostics, Montanists, Antinomians, "the followers of [Anne] Hutchinson in New England" [and] the later French prophets."[20] Edwards was not denouncing all uses of the imagination at this point, but ruling out the validity of any that claimed "immediate revelation." Yet this 1746 association of voices and visions with immediate revelation, which he had always rejected from his earliest writings, suggests he regarded the imagination with more wariness than before.

If Edwards was ambivalent on the role of the imagination in religious experience, he was surprisingly open to biological and psychological factors in the operation of the affections. In a state of affection, he allowed, "the motion of the blood and animal spirits begins to be sensibly altered; whence oftentimes arises some bodily sensation."[21] He said little on the metaphysical question of how soul and body interact—other than that it is a mystery—but implied that changes in either soul or body would affect the other.[22] When discussing temptation, he suggested that Satan cannot directly implant ideas into the human mind, as God can, but must stir up the "animal spirits" and so excite the "imagination or phantasy." This was one reason Edwards was skeptical toward those claiming to have had visions of God. Diabolical influence or emotional arousal could counterfeit divine inspiration. Several years after the *Affections*, when he edited *The Life of David Brainerd*, Edwards indicated that depression or "melancholy" was a "disease" that can produce "dark thoughts" of "spiritual desertion," the impression that God has deserted the soul. He also commented that those with "a very gay and sanguine natural temper" are "much more exposed to enthusiasm" than those with other mental temperaments. Edwards thus regarded "enthusiasm"—which he defined as "imaginary sights of God and Christ" and "immediate inward impressions" of divine voices—as influenced by variations in psychological temperament.[23] Although Edwards' comments on these matters are sketchy and incomplete, it is clear that he considered biological, social and psychological factors as co-determinants of religious experience.

We can conclude with two observations. First, one of Edwards' foundational ideas was not to judge spiritual phenomena by *a priori* assumptions, but to look more deeply at underlying dynamics and more broadly at extensive connections for clues to religious validity. He warned that spiritual phenomena could not be taken at face value, that hypocrites deceive the righteous, and the devil counter-

[20] WJE 2:285-87.
[21] WJE 2:96-97.
[22] WJE 23:166-6. He said the same about the mutual effects of body and mind: WJE 6:339.
[23] WJE 2:88-89; WJE 7:91-94; WJE 2:285.

feits true religion. His project of spiritual discernment was among the most penetrating and subtle in Christian history.

Second, Edwards probed the affections and religious experience with an intensity unique to the eighteenth century and perhaps the centuries since. The enlightened thinkers of his century thought it beneath their dignity to philosophize concerning religious experience, especially the affections. Even less did they consider it their life's work to categorize and analyze subjective states of religious sensibility. One of Edwards' gifts to modern intellectual history was the way he made it possible, for both religious and secular investigators, to view religious affections as phenomena worth study.

Abstract

The human person for Edwards is a bundle of affections that determine nearly everything that person feels, thinks and does. Therefore no treatment of his theology can escape the question of what he meant by the affections, and the role that the affections play in religious experience. This paper explores first the importance of the affections for Edwards, then his conception of their relation to the human person and true religion, and finally his estimation of how to evaluate them.