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The fall of man and the failure of Jonathan Edwards

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Introduction

Iain Murray argued that theology was 'the warp and woof of [Jonathan Edwards'] life.'¹ Wilson Kimnach called Edwards 'America's greatest religious genius'.² The works that he left behind give testimony of this theological acumen. In his extensive corpus, Jonathan Edwards dealt with many difficult doctrinal issues. One such doctrine, that of the fall of man, finds its way into many of these writings, whether they are sermons, discourses, treatises, or the rambling thoughts of a budding theologian.³

The doctrine of the fall of man presents theologians with a particularly difficult problem. Edwards himself acknowledged this challenge in 'Miscellany' 290.

It has been a matter attended with much difficulty and perplexity, how sin came into the world, which way came it into a creation that God created very good. If any spirit had at first been created sinful, the world would not have been created very good. And if the world had been created so, things placed in such order, the wheels so contrived and so set in motion, that in the process of things sin would unavoidably come out, how can the world be said to be created good?⁴

The difficulty arises when one considers, as Edwards pointed out, the sinless nature of the human being, particularly the faculty of the will, before the fall. Of

1 Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), xx.

2 Wilson H. Kimnach, editor, *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards: A Reader* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), ix.

3 For example, more than a dozen of Edwards' published 'Miscellanies' address this issue directly and untold others do so indirectly through discussions of original sin, Adam as the federal head of humanity, etc. These entries appear with greater frequency in Edwards' younger years.

4 Jonathan Edwards, No. 290, in *The 'Miscellanies,' Entry Nos. a-z, aa-zz, 1-500*, vol. 13 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards [Works]*, ed. by Thomas A. Schafer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 382.

Adam's will, Edwards noted in the next 'Miscellany', 'he was more free, or, as they speak, had more freedom of will.'⁵ In another, he continued, 'Adam's will was free in a respect that ours since the fall is not.'⁶ In other words, Adam was free to choose exactly as he willed, free of corrupt and untrustworthy inclinations.

However, it is at this very point that the clarity of Edwards' own thinking further complicates the situation. He reasoned in *Freedom of the Will*,

because every act of the will is some way connected with the understanding, and is as the greatest apparent good is, in the manner which has already been explained; namely, the soul always wills or chooses that which, in the present view of the mind, considered in the whole of that view, and all that belongs to it, appears most agreeable. Because as was observed before, nothing is more evident than that, when men act voluntarily, and do what they please, then they do what appears most agreeable to them; and to say otherwise, would be as much as to affirm, that men don't choose what appears to suit them best, or what seems most pleasing to them; or that they don't choose what they prefer.⁷

That is, the human will is inclined to choose the 'greatest apparent good' as it appears to its present state. Adam, devoid of sin and an appetite for it, appeared to have no logical reason to choose it. The 'greatest apparent good' in the Garden was that of God and his covenantal promise of life in exchange for man's obedience. The question, as Gerstner put it, 'is why man chose to become man the sinner. How could a good creature of God do an evil thing?'⁸

Perry Miller once described Jonathan Edwards as 'one of America's five or six major artists.'⁹ When it comes to the doctrine of the fall of man, Edwards painted himself into a corner. First, Jonathan Edwards failed to answer this question satisfactorily. Then, in his attempt to explain how a perfectly good Adam could choose the worst, Edwards failed to account adequately for his own theology of the will and did not recognize the insufficiency of the answer he provided. Edwards' offering will be discussed below and its inadequacies noted. However, there is within Edwards' theology of man a potential solution that he himself did not elaborate upon. It is likely that he may not even have recognized the potential of this solution. That potential solution will be discussed below as well.

Due to the constraints of the present essay, a historical survey of the doctrine of the fall of man will not be offered here. Likewise, a biblical solution will not be offered. Instead, the focus of this essay is the material found in the work of Edwards himself.

5 Edwards, No. 291, *Works* 13:383.

6 Edwards, No. 436, *Works* 13:484.

7 Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. by Paul Ramsey, *Works* 1 (1957): 217.

8 John H. Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards: A Mini-Theology* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1996), 35.

9 Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (New York: World Publishing, 1949), xii.

Edwards' doctrine of the fall of man

As has already been intimated, the doctrine of the fall of man is notoriously difficult. At the heart of the issue is this question: If Adam was inherently good and in no way inclined to evil in his nature, how could he choose to do other than good?¹⁰ Or, what is the explanation for this contrary choice that Adam has made?¹¹

Edwards attempted to answer these questions. Adam, he preached, 'was perfectly free from any corruptions or sinful inclinations.'¹² Yet, in this same sermon, 'All God's Methods Are Most Reasonable,' Edwards continued, '[Adam] had no sinful inclinations to hurry him on to sin; he did it of his own free and mere choice.'¹³ In so arguing, Edwards violated his own understanding of the will because, as he noted, to choose to sin Adam must violate the law of his own nature.¹⁴

However, Edwards did offer an explanation for these seemingly contradictory facts. First, from a theological perspective, Edwards appealed to God's decree to permit such a fall. Second, from a more philosophical standpoint, Edwards reasoned that Adam fell because he failed to look to God for his salvation.

God's permission

The primary reason that Adam could and did fall, Edwards commented, was God's decision to permit this tragedy. Note the caution with which Edwards proceeded in *Freedom of the Will*, ever aware of the danger of making God guilty of evil himself.

But if by 'the author of sin,' is meant the permitter, or not a hinderer of sin; and at the same time, a disposer of the state of events, in such a manner, for wise, holy and most excellent ends and purposes, that sin, if it be permitted or not hindered, will most certainly and infallibly follow: I say, if this be all that is meant, by being the author of sin, I don't deny that God is the author of sin (though I dislike and reject the phrase, as that which by use

10 Turretin asked the question this way: 'How could a holy man fall, and what was the true cause of his fall?' (Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, volume one, trans. by George M. Giger, ed. by James T. Dennison, Jr. [Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1992], 606).

11 Edwards also sought to explain Satan's fall in his 'Miscellanies.' 'Then the question is, how came the devil by it, seeing he had no tempter? I answer, 'tis probable some extraordinary manifestation of God's sovereignty was his temptation, the occasion of his sin and rebellion' (Edwards, No. 290, *Works* 13:382). And, 'The iniquity by which [Satan] fell was pride, or his being lifted up by reason of his superlative beauty and brightness' (Edwards, No. 980, in *The 'Miscellanies,' Entry Nos. 833-1152*, ed. by Amy Plantinga Pauw, *Works* 20 [2002]: 296).

12 Edwards, 'All God's Methods Are Most Reasonable,' in *Sermons and Discourses: 1723-1729*, ed. by Kenneth P. Minkema, *Works* 14 (1997): 168.

13 Ibid.

14 Edwards, No. 884, *Works* 20:144.

and custom is apt to carry another sense), it is no reproach for the most High to be thus the author of sin.¹⁵

However, God did not permit the fall without reason. Edwards offers two such reasons. The first reason, Edwards maintained, was to reveal the beauty of God's own nature.

This is not to be the actor of sin, but on the contrary, of holiness. What God doth herein, is holy; and a glorious exercise of the infinite excellency of his nature.¹⁶

Edwards explained this more fully in 'Miscellany' 553, appropriately entitled 'The end of creation'.

There are many of the divine attributes that, if God had not created the world, never would have had any exercise: the power of God, the wisdom and prudence and contrivance of God, and the goodness and mercy and grace of God, and the justice of God. It is fit that the divine attributes should have exercise. Indeed God knew as perfectly, that there were these attributes fundamentally in himself before they were in exercise, as since; but God, as he delights in his own excellency and glorious perfections, so he delights in the exercise of those perfections.¹⁷

The second reason that Edwards suggested for God's permitting the fall of man relates directly to God's redemptive purposes. Here one can clearly recognize the supralapsarian construct in which Edwards conceived God's decrees. In a note on John 16:8-11, Edwards commented, 'God permitted the fall that his elect people might know good and evil.'¹⁸ 'Miscellany' 702, a lengthy one in which Edwards sought to explain the 'works of creation, providence, and redemption,' offers this interpretation of God's purposes: '[the] world [was] made for the work of redemption.'¹⁹

Man's failure

While God may be the 'author of sin' as Edwards defined it above, all blame for Adam's fall is to fall on Adam.²⁰ Given that Edwards never produced a systematic theology, the reader must look primarily to Edwards' 'Miscellanies' for any

15 Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, Works 1:399.

16 Ibid.

17 Edwards, No. 553, in *The 'Miscellanies', Entry Nos. 501-832*, ed. by Ava Chamberlain, Works 18 (2000): 97.

18 Edwards, No. 498, in *Notes on Scripture*, ed. by Stephen J. Stein, Works 15 (1998): 592. This seems to contradict God's declaring the tree of good and evil off limits to Adam and Eve.

19 Edwards, No. 702, Works 18:307.

20 Turretin stated it this way: 'Let it be sufficient to hold together these two things: that this most dreadful fall did not happen without the providence of God (but to its causality, it contributed nothing); and that man alone, moved by the temptation of Satan, was its true and proper cause' (Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:611).

lengthy discussion of the fall of man. The primary entries come from 'Miscellanies' 290, 436, and 501.

'Miscellany' 290, written when Edwards was twenty-four, serves as a focal passage in his doctrine of the fall of man:

If it be inquired how man came to sin, seeing he had no sinful inclinations in him, except God took away his grace from him that he had been wont to give him and so let him fall, I answer, there was no need of that; there was no need of taking away any that had been given him, but he sinned under that temptation because God did not give him more. He did not take away that grace from him while he was perfectly innocent, which grace was his original righteousness; but he only withheld his confirming grace, that grace which is given now in heaven, such grace as shall fit the soul to surmount every temptation. This was the grace Adam was to have had if he had stood, when he came to receive his reward.²¹

Several key concepts stand out in this passage. First, Adam possessed 'no sinful inclinations.' Therefore, as Edwards taught in 'East of Eden,' 'It was in man's own power perfectly to obey the law of God' because 'he had no sin then that he was under the power and dominion of.'²² In other words, there was nothing in Adam's nature that predisposed him to moral failure.

Second, Adam's difficulty arose not from what was within but what he was without. Careful to protect God's impeccable image, Edwards argued in 'Miscellany' 436 that God had given Adam 'sufficient grace' for all contingencies. In this 'Miscellany', Edwards posited,

I say, this must be meant by his having sufficient grace, viz. that he had grace sufficient to render him a free agent, not only with respect to [his] whole will, but with respect to his rational, or the will that arose from a rational judgment of what was indeed best for himself.²³

Moreover, 'Adam had a sufficient assistance of God always present with him, to have enabled him to obey, if he had used his natural abilities in endeavoring it.'²⁴ Adam fell because he failed to use that 'sufficient assistance' in the time of his trial. That is, God had given Adam all of the grace, faculties, and abilities necessary for success but did not force him to use them.

However, Adam lacked 'confirming grace,' that grace which would have guaranteed his preservation. God sovereignly 'withheld' this grace from Adam for God was under no obligation to provide it.

God is no way obliged to afford to his creature such grace and influence

21 Edwards, No. 290, *Works* 13:382.

22 Edwards, 'East of Eden', in *Sermons and Discourses: 1730-1733*, ed. by Mark Valeri, *Works* 17 (1999): 338.

23 Edwards, No. 436, *Works* 13:485.

24 Edwards, No. 501, *Works* 18:51. In a sermon, 'East of Eden', Edwards also claimed that 'it was in man's own power perfectly to obey the law of God' (Edwards, 'East of Eden', *Works* 17:338).

as shall render it impossible for him to sin. God is not obliged to make the creature unchangeable and at first to be in a confirmed state of holiness, so that it should be impossible for him to be otherwise.... God created man in a state of innocency, and gave him such grace that he was perfectly free from any corruptions or sinful inclinations; nor did he take away that grace from him. But neither did he oblige himself to give him more, so as certainly to prevent him from giving way to any temptation: that was to be given to him when his time of probation was over, if he had continued innocent during that probation.... God gave man sufficient warning, and he had no sinful inclinations to hurry him on to sin; he did it of his own free and mere choice. Only God did not prevent him by his confirming grace. Thus God was not obliged to prevent man's sin by his grace in a state of innocency....²⁵

However, Adam's mutability made 'confirming grace' necessary.²⁶ Again from 'Miscellany' 436, Edwards described this missing grace as 'an efficacious grace,' 'a grace that should certainly uphold him in all temptations he could meet with.'²⁷ Such 'confirming grace' Edwards believed to be reserved for the saints in heaven to prevent any further apostasy by making the soul fit 'to surmount every temptation.'

25 Edwards, 'All God's Methods Are Most Reasonable', *Works* 14:167-168.

26 Calvin noted the power of this mutability in Adam's nature as well. 'Therefore Adam could have stood if he wished, seeing that he fell solely by his own will. But it was because his will was capable of being bent to one side or the other, and was not given the constancy to persevere, that he fell so easily. Yet his choice of good and evil was free, and not that alone, but the highest rectitude was in his mind and will, and all the organic parts were rightly composed to obedience, until in destroying himself he corrupted his own blessings' (John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, ed. by John T. McNeill, trans. by Ford L. Battles [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960], 1.15.8). Turretin added, 'Although that mutability indicates the possibility of the fall and is the cause sine qua non (or the antecedent of the fall), still it cannot be considered its cause proper and of itself. This is so not only because it was a condition created together with innocent man by God (which was also in the elect angels before their confirmation without any defect), but also because it is indeed the negation of some good' (Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:607). The good negated, Edwards would argue, was that of God's withholding 'confirming grace'.

27 Edwards, No. 436, *Works* 13:485. The potential source for this Edwardsean nuance can be found in either William Ames or Turretin. Ames wrote, 'For he had received righteousness and grace by which he might have remained obedient, if he had so chosen. That righteousness and grace was not taken from him before he sinned, although strengthening and confirming grace by which the act of sinning might have been hindered and the act of obedience effected was not given him' (Ames, *The Marrow of Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1968], 114). Turretin wrote, 'I confess that with permission here is involved the negation of the efficacious grace and help by which man might actually stand. Rather he only did not give the new grace of confirmation or the efficacy by which the grace in him might be actuated (which he was neither bound to give, nor in his most wise counsel did he will to give) in order to test the obedience of the creature' (Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:610).

Third, Adam's perseverance would have guaranteed his reception of this 'confirming grace.'²⁸ 'This was the grace Adam was to have had if he had stood,' Edwards reasoned.²⁹ Echoing the language of Genesis, Edwards remarked in 'East of Eden,'

Adam had a glorious opportunity of obtaining eternal life if he would persist in perfectly obeying the law and performed righteousness, which he had power to do. He was then to be invited by God to eat of the tree of life and so was to live forever.³⁰

'Confirming grace,' withheld from Adam, dependent upon the keeping of his covenantal obligation, would have guaranteed success and promised eternal life. For Adam, it was within his power to do so and he failed and he fell.

A critique

Typical of Edwards' theological works, his explanation of the fall of man proves to be thorough in that he considered the problem from several perspectives, that of God and that of man. However, Edwards fails to account for Adam's fall in a way that is consistent within the proposal itself and with his theology of the will.

Edwards' proposal does not account for Adam's choosing contrary to the 'greatest apparent good.' Adam was, as Edwards put it, created in a 'state of innocence'.³¹ He was 'perfectly free from any corruptions or sinful inclinations'.³² His inclinations were completely in line with his understanding and will.³³ He knew only the peace and beauty of the Garden, the blessing of God's presence in the cool of the day, and the promise of the tree of life attached to covenantal faithfulness. On the other hand, Adam knew nothing of the serpent, the taste of the forbidden fruit, nor disobedience. In fact, Edwards argued, 'God gave man sufficient warning' against choosing otherwise³⁴ and 'sufficient grace' to do that which 'was indeed best for himself'.³⁵ Edwards seems to have failed to recognize the horns of the dilemma upon which he found himself.

28 Here Edwards may have been drawing from Calvin or those influenced by him. Calvin noted, 'For, the individual parts of his soul were formed to uprightness, the soundness of his mind stood firm, and his will was free to choose the good.... But the reason he did not sustain man by the virtue of perseverance lies hidden in his plan; Man, indeed, received the ability provided he exercised the will; but he did not have the will to use his ability, for this exercising of the will would have been followed by perseverance' (Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, 1.15.8).

29 Edwards, No. 290, *Works* 13:382.

30 Edwards, 'East of Eden', *Works* 17:343-344.

31 Edwards, 'All God's Methods Are Most Reasonable', *Works* 14:168.

32 *Ibid.*

33 Edwards noted that 'the will is the mind's inclination' (Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits, in Ethical Writings*, ed. by Paul Ramsey, *Works* 8 (1989): 376.

34 Edwards, 'All God's Methods Are Most Reasonable', *Works* 14:168.

35 Edwards, No. 436, *Works* 13:485.

Without intentionally seeking to answer the question of the will, Edwards did offer one explanation as to why Adam may have chosen as he did: he might have been deceived.³⁶ In 'Miscellany' 436, Edwards argued that due to the presence of 'sufficient grace,' Adam 'could not fall without having [his] judgment deceived'.³⁷ Yet, that is the very thing that happened, according to Edwards.

The case must be thus, therefore, with our first parents, when tempted: their sense of their duty to God and their love to it must be above their inferior appetite, so that that inferior appetite of itself was not sufficient to master the holy principle; yet the rational will, being perverted by a deceived judgment and setting in with the inferior appetite, overcame and overthrew the gracious inclination.³⁸

Unfortunately, this proposal presents new problems. First, in what way was Adam deceived? The biblical text speaks against it. 'And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression' (1 Tim. 2:14). Thus, deception explains Eve's failure but it is not to her that sin is ascribed. Adam bears that distinction.

Oliver Crisp has suggested that Adam was self-deceived. Adam deceived himself, Crisp wrote, 'allowing his inferior appetites to overthrow his rational judgement, including his sense of duty and love towards God, by choosing that which was hateful, but which he had been deceived into thinking was best for himself'.³⁹ According to this self-deception model, Adam compartmentalized his God-given principles, separating his natural appetites from his rational understanding, allowing Adam to deceive 'himself into thinking that rebellion against the divine command was better for himself'.⁴⁰ Convinced that what he was doing represented the best course of actions, Adam 'chose that which was in itself hateful', believing that such a course of actions was truly favorable.⁴¹

Gerstner recognized this potential in Edwards' writings and found it untenable. Speaking of two still unpublished 'Miscellanies', Gerstner noted, 'In Miscellany 1394 [Edwards] has slipped so deeply as to suggest that the rational judgement of created man could be overpowered by the sensibility so that man yielding to that sinned, as Adam did, with his eyes open. In the very next Miscellany (1395) he contends that man's rational judgement must be perverted before he can sin!'⁴² Incredulous, he asked, '[H]ow could man have been deceived if he had a natural understanding sufficient to comprehend the difference between a

36 'Man might be deceived', Edwards commented. The same exact wording can be found in both 'East of Eden' and 'Miscellany' 501, revealing the manner in which Edwards used his 'Miscellanies' in his sermons (*Works* 17:338 and *Works* 18:51, respectively).

37 Edwards, No. 436, *Works* 13:485.

38 *Ibid.*, 486.

39 Oliver D. Crisp, *Jonathan Edwards and the Metaphysics of Sin* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 40.

40 *Ibid.*, 44.

41 *Ibid.*, 40ff.

42 Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards: A Mini-Theology*, 39.

command of the Creator and a temptation of a creature? If he did not, how could he be held responsible?⁴³ To which Gerstner answered, Adam 'made a choice in accord with [his] rational judgement.'⁴⁴ You cannot separate the so-called inferior appetites from the rational judgement. As Sam Storms rightly interpreted Edwards' theology of the will, 'The cause of an act of will is that motive which appears most agreeable to the mind.'⁴⁵ Adam liked what he saw, knew what he was doing, and he did it anyway. In the end, Edwards', and Crisp's, self-deception proposal falls short. It offers one possible explanation as to *how* Adam might choose to do evil but it fails to explain *why* Adam did choose to do evil. The problem remains. 'Adam pre-fall was not inclined to sin, yet he chose to sin.'⁴⁶

Connected to this notion of deception is that of Adam's pre-fall nature. As Edwards had proclaimed elsewhere, Adam, though mutable, was created without defect. Yet, Edwards did not always hold to that distinction firmly. For example, in *Freedom of the Will*, Edwards remarked, 'It was meet, if sin did come into existence, and appear in the world, it should arise from the imperfection which properly belongs to a creature' so as not to impugn God's testimony of himself.⁴⁷ He continued, 'If sin had not arose from the imperfection of the creature, it would not have been so visible, that it did not arise from God, as the positive cause, and real source of it.'⁴⁸ Edwards never explained to what imperfection he was referring or how it is that God's good creation contained such an imperfection. In *Original Sin*, Edwards wrote of the 'vast disadvantages' that Adam and Eve experienced. There he noted that they 'had no more in their nature to keep them from sin, or incline 'em to virtue, than their posterity'.⁴⁹ That certainly is an odd comment to make about the perfect couple, living in the perfect creation, endowed with 'sufficient grace' by the Creator.

Moreover, in what way was Adam's God-given grace 'sufficient,' if it was unable to prevent Adam from being deceived? Was it not sufficient to enable Adam to determine 'what was indeed best for himself'?⁵⁰ Furthermore, Edwards had argued that God did not withdraw any grace that he had given Adam.⁵¹ If this is the case, either this 'sufficient grace' was actually insufficient in and of itself or Edwards was unclear and inconsistent on this matter.

Recognizing the treacherous ground upon which he found himself, Edwards excused himself by appealing to the limitations of space. 'It would require room

43 John Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* in 3 volumes (Powhatan, VA: Berea, 1992), 2:307.

44 Ibid.

45 Sam Storms, 'The Will: Fettered Yet Free', in *A God-Entranced Vision of All Things*, ed. by John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 210.

46 Crisp, *Jonathan Edwards and the Metaphysics of Sin*, 46.

47 Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, *Works* 1:413.

48 Ibid.

49 Edwards, *Original Sin*, ed. by Clyde A. Holbrook, *Works* 3 (1970): 232.

50 Edwards, No. 436, *Works* 13:485.

51 Edwards, No. 290, *Works* 13:382.

that can't be here allowed, fully to consider all the difficulties which have been started'.⁵²

A proposed solution to the problem of the fall of man

When it came to the doctrine of the fall of man, America's preeminent theologian found himself in a quagmire. In attempting to answer this difficult question Edwards seemingly dug himself deeper and deeper into the philosophical hole. Gerstner accused Edwards of becoming 'intoxicated with the greatest theological problem in the entire Word of God'.⁵³ Thomas Schaffer argued that it is here, in Edwards' attempt to hold together Adam's innocence and his mutability, that his doctrine of the will 'breaks'.⁵⁴ Even Sam Storms, who has written on this topic more than any other recent Edwards scholar, admitted Edwards' defeat: 'Edwards's scheme is capable only of explaining how Adam might continue to sin but not how he might begin to sin'.⁵⁵

So, should one ignore Edwards, looking elsewhere for a solution to the problem? The answer is twofold: yes and no. Yes, one should disregard his proposal as outlined above as insufficient. Fortunately, however, all is not lost. The reader may find within Edwards' system of thought another answer, an answer more amenable to his theology of the will. It is to this potential solution that this essay now turns.

Edwards penned 'Miscellany' 290 on the fall in 1727/28 while still a young man under the theological watchcare of his grandfather, the great Solomon Stoddard. Later that same year, Edwards made another entry in his 'Miscellanies', number 301. This 'Miscellany' addressed the nature of fallen man. However, it is here that the reader finds the seed of an idea that may answer Edwards' problem of the fall of man.

The best philosophy that I have met with of original sin and all sinful inclinations, habits and principles, is undoubtedly that of Mr. Stoddard's, of this town of Northampton: that is, that it is self-love in conjunction with the absence of the image and love of God, that natural and necessary inclination that man has to his own benefit together with the absence of original righteousness; or in other words, the absence of that influence of God's Spirit, whereby love to God and to holiness is kept up to that degree that this other inclination is always kept in its due subordination. But this being gone, his self-love governs alone; and having not this superior principle to regulate it, breaks out into all manner of exorbitancies, and becomes in innumerable cases a vile and odious disposition, and cause thousands

52 Ibid.

53 Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards: A Mini-Theology*, 39.

54 Thomas A. Schaefer, 'The Concept of Being in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards', (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1951), 228.

55 Storms, 'The Will: Fettered Yet Free', 214.

of unlovely and hateful actions. There is nothing new put into the nature that we call sin, but only the same self-love that necessarily belongs to the nature working and influencing, without regulation from that superior principle that primitively belongs to our nature and that is necessary in order to the harmonious existing of it. This natural and necessary inclination to ourselves, without that governor and guide, will certainly without anything else produce, or rather will become, all those sinful inclinations which are in the corrupted nature of man.⁵⁶

While this 'Miscellany' was a reflection on man's present state, the doctrine of self-love may help explain why Adam acted as he did. Moreover, it may help unknot Edwards' other proposal.

Edwards' doctrine of self-love has been largely overlooked. Nearly all recent consideration of this topic comes within the context of Edwardsean ethics. Only Gerstner and Storms mention self-love at any length in regards to the fall. In both cases, the authors discussed self-love primarily as it relates to post-fall humanity and limit their interaction to a few short paragraphs and select citations, notably from *Original Sin*.⁵⁷ Thus, the doctrine of self-love is due for renewed consideration.

Self-love, as a defining principle of humankind, will be defined below. Likewise, its relationship to both God and man will be considered as well as its relationship to the fall. Finally, the way in which this doctrine may explain Adam's fall will be discussed.

Self-love defined

Self-love, Edwards commented, is one of 'the principles with which man was created'.⁵⁸ It is a God-given trait intended for man's good and God's glory. Self-love operates in tandem with God-love.

Self-love, as Edwards defined it, is 'a love to happiness and aversion to misery'.⁵⁹ He further defined the notion of self-love in 'Miscellany' 530. There Edwards commented, 'Self-love is [one's] love of his own pleasure and happiness, and hatred of his own misery; or rather, 'tis only a capacity of enjoyment or suffering'.⁶⁰ Self-love so defined is morally neutral, tending neither to good nor evil apart from righteous or sinful inclinations. Likewise, such self-love can be found both in God and man.

God's self-love

That self-love, in and of itself, is a good thing can be seen in the presence of this

56 Edwards, No. 301, *Works* 13:387.

57 Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 2:313-14 and Sam Storms, *Tragedy in Eden* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), 218-19.

58 Edwards, 'Outline of "A Rational Account"', in *Scientific and Philosophical Writings*, ed. Wallace E. Anderson, *Works* 6 (1980): 396.

59 Edwards, 'Born Again', *Works* 17:192.

60 Edwards, No. 530, *Works* 18:73.

attribute in God. Of God, Edwards wrote, he 'infinitely loves himself, because his being is infinite.'⁶¹ Edwards couched his Trinitarian theology in the language of self-love.

God's love is primarily to himself, and his infinite delight is in himself, in the Father and the Son loving and delighting in each other. We often read of the Father loving the Son, and being well-pleased in the Son, and of the Son loving the Father. In the infinite love and delight that is between these two persons consists the infinite happiness of God.... And therefore seeing the Scripture signifies that the Spirit of God is the love of God, therefore it follows that the Holy Spirit proceeds from, or is breathed forth from, the Father and the Son in some way or other infinitely above all our conceptions, as the divine essence entirely flows out and is breathed forth in infinitely pure love and sweet delight from the Father and the Son; and this is that pure river of water of life that proceeds out of the throne of the Father and the Son, as we read at the beginning of the twenty-second chapter of the Revelation: for Christ himself tells us that by the water of life, or living water, is meant the Holy Ghost.⁶²

Moreover, in God's self-love, one discovers his holiness.⁶³ Finally, from this love to himself arises God's love for all other things. 'This love includes in it, or rather is the same as, a love to everything, as they are all communications of himself.'⁶⁴

Man's self-love

Man's love for himself, while not as metaphysically complex as God's, is complicated by his mutable nature. Adam's self-love before the fall manifested itself differently than does sinful man's after the fall. In *Charity and Its Fruit*, Edwards remarked, 'Man before the fall loved himself or his own happiness, I suppose, as much as after his fall. But then a superior principle of divine love had the throne, it being in such strength that it wholly regulated and directed self-love. But since the fall this principle of divine love has lost its strength, or rather is dead.'⁶⁵ Therefore, the two must be considered separately.

Before the fall. Adam before the fall possessed a pure form of self-love, one undefiled by sin and bent toward the maintenance of his present happiness. In light of this, the covenantal language of God's prohibition can be seen as appealing to Adam's innate desire to propagate pleasure and avoid misery. 'Self-love is a good principle, if well-regulated,' Edwards wrote.⁶⁶ Adam's primitive self-

61 Edwards, 'The Mind', *Works* 6:381.

62 Edwards, 'Treatise on Grace', in *Writings on the Trinity, Grace, and Faith*, ed. by Sang Hyun Lee, *Works* 21 (2003): 184.

63 *Ibid.*, 153.

64 Edwards, 'The Mind', *Works* 6:365.

65 Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits*, *Works* 8:256.

66 Edwards, 'Degrees of Mercy', in *Sermons and Discourses: 1734-1738*, ed. by M. X. Lesser, *Works* 19 (2001): 622. Self-love is to be regulated by the presence and predominance

love was 'directed and regulated by the will and word of God,' guiding him to do good, to be obedient to his Creator.⁶⁷ Obedience, motivated by self-love, results in man's happiness and God's great pleasure.⁶⁸

[Another] reason why the love of God makes duty easy and pleasant is because, by obeying God's commands, they do what is well pleasing to him they love. All the pleasure of love consists in pleasing the person beloved. 'Tis the nature of love to rouse and stir to an earnest desire to please, and certainly it must be a great pleasure to have earnest desires satisfied. Now the love of God causes those in whose heart it is implanted more earnestly to desire to please God than anything in the world, causes them heartily to embrace opportunities of pleasing him and sweetly to reflect on it when he knows they have pleased him.⁶⁹

While most modern treatments of Edwards' doctrine of self-love concern themselves with post-fall ethics, William Danaher rightly interprets this concept in light of the pre-fall ideal. 'The love of God and the love of self, taken as merely a desire for one's happiness are ontologically correlated; to experience true happiness and by extension true satisfaction, one must love God.'⁷⁰ True to his Reformed heritage, Edwards understood that the proper end of such self-love was 'to love God and enjoy him [forever].'⁷¹

After the fall. As one would expect, Edwards had a very dim view of man's condition after the fall. Because of the fall, man has lost his 'nobler and more extensive principles.'⁷² Rather than man's self-love being subservient to his God-love, or desire to please God, the exact opposite is now true. As Edwards noted, 'since the fall this principle of divine love has lost its strength, or rather is dead. So that self-love continuing in its former strength, and having no superior principle to regulate it, becomes inordinate in its influence, and governs where it should be only a servant.'⁷³ William Ames, a theologian with whom Edwards would have been quite familiar, described self-love as the source of all sin. '[S]inners have

of God-love. One must note, however, that God-love is predominant not by mandate but by human free will. In 'Miscellany' 530, Edwards commented, 'And love to good that is a man's own in this sense, is what is ordinarily called self-love; and superior to this, love to God *can and ought to be*' (emphasis mine) (Edwards, No. 530, *Works* 18:74).

67 Ibid.

68 In *The End for Which God Created the World*, Edwards wrote, 'The more happiness the greater the union: when happiness is perfect, the union is perfect' (Edwards, *The End for Which God Created the World*, *Works* 8:533).

69 Edwards, 'True Love to God', in *Sermons and Discourses: 1720-1723*, ed. by Wilson H. Kinnach, *Works* 10 (1992): 637.

70 William J. Danaher Jr., *The Trinitarian Ethics of Jonathan Edwards* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 59.

71 Edwards, 'Born Again', *Works* 17:190.

72 Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits*, *Works* 8:252.

73 Ibid., 256.

an inordinate love of themselves', he wrote.⁷⁴ Or, as John Piper states, 'What is evil about self-love [after the fall] is its finding happiness in such small, narrow, limited, confined reality, namely, the self and all that makes much of the self.'⁷⁵

After the fall, everything in God's created order has been reversed. Serpents have dominion over women. Women have dominion over men. And, the self has dominion over God.

Self-love and the fall

Man, created to love the Lord his God with his entire being and his neighbor as much as he loves himself, went astray in the Garden. Edwards, in his discussions of self-love, offered one potential, and certainly unexplored, reason Adam may have gone against the 'greatest apparent good' and willfully disobeyed God's explicit commands. Adam was acting upon his native principle of self-love.

Along with the ability to choose freely, Adam was given the principles of God-love and self-love, both of which were good and proper, free of any evil. So long as Adam's God-love reigned, his otherwise good self-love remained in check. In the Garden, Adam enjoyed regular fellowship with God. In his presence, Adam readily recognized God as the 'greatest apparent good' and responded with God-love that manifested itself in obedience and self-love.

However, in Genesis 3, God sovereignly permitted the circumstances to be changed; he denied Adam the pleasure and security of his presence. God 'withheld his confirming grace', Edwards wrote in 'Miscellany' 290.⁷⁶ There Adam found himself alone. Apart from God's guiding presence, Adam was left to determine his course using the faculties that God had provided. Acting upon the principle of self-love, he had to choose between continued obedience to an unseen God and its incumbent blessings or the possibility of increasing his immediate pleasure by eating of the fruit that was then pleasant to the eyes and was, at that moment, the 'greatest *apparent* good' (emphasis mine). Seen in this light, Adam was presented with two options, both of which could appear to be good and both of which appealed to his innate loves. Therein lays the temptation or test. Adam had to persevere in obedience by choosing the truly greater good, one that is motivated by his concern for God's glory. However, 'by reason of the weakness or absence of other-love [God-love] which should restrain and regulate its influence,' '[self-love's] influence [became] inordinate,' Edwards argued.⁷⁷ It is not that self-love was alone but that in God's absence it became the dominant principle. As Edwards remarked elsewhere, 'the predominancy of self-love is the foundation of all sin'.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Ames, *Marrow of Theology*, 253.

⁷⁵ John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998), 107.

⁷⁶ Edwards, No. 290, 13:382.

⁷⁷ Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits, Works* 8:256.

⁷⁸ Edwards, No. 1010, *Works* 20:342.

Therein lies the incredible power and danger of Adam's temptation. 'If there be only self-love that bears rule, it will be contented with nothing short of the throne of God'.⁷⁹ Thus, Adam succumbed not to deceit, nor feminine wiles, nor an inferior nature. Adam chose to disregard God's command by responding to the urgings of his self-love and pursued what appeared to be in his immediate best interest.

Observations

A few observations should be made here. First, nowhere does Edwards advance this hypothesis as an explanation for Adam's fall. Instead, the conclusions are based upon observations drawn from Edwards' writings spanning many years and many different genres. Edwards' comments and observations occur within discussions and sermons related to the topic of Adam's fall and the nature of original sin.

Second, these observations offer the reader some potential answers to questions raised above in regards to Edwards' published propositions. For example, 'Miscellany' 437 introduces the notion of an 'inferior appetite' which in some way was able to overcome Adam's 'gracious inclinations'.⁸⁰ A self-love which exists apart from the restraining power of God-love is that 'inferior appetite' to which Edwards referred.

Likewise, in 'Miscellany' 501, Edwards mentioned a 'sufficient assistance' which would 'have enabled him to obey, if he had used his natural abilities in endeavoring it'.⁸¹ Is it the case that this 'sufficient assistance' was God himself? Possibly the 'natural abilities' which Adam had available to him were those of self-love and God-love, which, properly used, would have motivated him to call on God in his greatest moment of need.

Lastly, 'Miscellany' 290 states that God 'withheld his confirming grace'.⁸² Perhaps, the 'confirming grace' withheld from Adam was God's perpetual presence itself. Gerstner believed this 'confirming grace' to be the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.⁸³ The biblical text seems to support the notion that Adam stood strong in God's presence before the fall and that it is only in God's absence that Adam falls. Moreover, Edwards proffered that this 'confirming grace' is 'that grace which is given now in heaven', reserved as a reward for earthly perseverance.⁸⁴ Certainly those in heaven enjoy the everlasting presence of God and are assured that he will in no way cast them out for their names have been graciously written in the Lamb's book of life.

79 Edwards, No. 534, *Works* 18:78.

80 Edwards, No. 437, *Works* 13:486.

81 Edwards, No. 501, *Works* 18:51.

82 Edwards, No. 290, *Works* 13:382.

83 Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 2:316-19. In *Freedom of the Will*, Edwards spoke of God 'withholding further assistance and divine influence' (Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, *Works* 1:413).

84 Edwards, No. 290, *Works* 13:382.

Finally, it might be observed that an appeal to Adam's self-love accounts for his choosing contrary to the 'greater apparent good' as the biblical reader understands it. Adam, presented with two apparent goods, chose that which was most apparent at the time and therefore appeared to be greater just as Edwards argued in *Freedom of the Will*: 'The soul always wills or chooses that which, in the *present view* of the mind, considered in the whole of that view, and all that belongs to it, appears most agreeable' (emphasis mine).⁸⁵ Such a decision did not go against Adam's nature but was driven by Adam's nature. This decision did not violate Adam's free will but arose properly out of it. In the end, Edwards remained true to his theology of the will.

Conclusion

It has been a matter attended with much difficulty and perplexity, how sin came into the world, which way came it into a creation that God created very good. If any spirit had at first been created sinful, the world would not have been created very good. And if the world had been created so, things placed in such order, the wheels so contrived and so set in motion, that in the process of things sin would unavoidably come out, how can the world be said to be created good?⁸⁶

As Crisp so aptly stated, 'The doctrine of the fall is notoriously troublesome'.⁸⁷ Gerstner suggested that question is better left unanswered simply because 'this problem is beyond us'.⁸⁸ Jonathan Edwards, on the other hand, did not see it that way. Like so many others before him, he attempted to make straight this theological maze.

In fact, Edwards actually offered a number of potential solutions, each tangentially related to the others. First, he proffered that Adam fell as the result of God's decretive will. Operating in this way God revealed his power and prudence, his goodness, and mercy. The fall, he would write, was part and parcel of God's redemptive purposes.

Not satisfied that he had answered the questions asked about events in the Garden, Edwards also concerned himself with Adam's role in the primal sin. Edwards' solution to this part of the query can be found in his 'Miscellanies', a number of sermons, and in *Original Sin*. Adam acted in the manner in which he did, he wrote, as a result of God's withholding the grace necessary to withstand the temptation. Unfortunately, Edwards never explains the nature of this grace fully, its relationship to God's otherwise good creation, nor the manner in which any of this might answer how it was that a sinless Adam might choose to sin against the prevailing motives of his will. As Storms acknowledged, 'Once

85 Edwards, *Freedom of the Will, Works* 1:217.

86 Edwards, No. 290, *Works* 13:382.

87 *Ibid.*, 25.

88 Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards: A Mini-Theology*, 40.

Edwards has exempted God from any direct causal influence in the initial transgression of Adam, he simply has no way of explaining how the first man, being righteous, could generate an act of rebellion, and this notwithstanding the positive presence and sustaining influence of divine grace!⁸⁹

Thus, while Edwards' intended solution falls short, his writings may contain the right answer. Crisp attempted to wed the various aspects of his thought into the category of self-deceit. That is, Adam convinced himself that the lesser of the two choices presented to him in the Garden, disobedience over against obedience, was in fact the greater of the two. Like Edwards' self-acknowledged proposals, Crisp's seems to fall short of solving the conundrum. However, self-deception does point to another solution, that of Edwards' doctrine of self-love. It is this concept, self-love, that explains how a good Adam, devoid of any sin or any experience of its hypothetical benefits, chooses contrary to God's revealed will, pleasing his natural appetites as they alone appealed to his mind as the greatest apparent good.

Regardless of one's final perception of Edwards' thoughts on these matters, or the proposed solution of self-love, he must admit that in this, and all things, Edwards lived up to his resolution: 'Resolved, when I think of any theorem in divinity to be solved, immediately to do what I can toward solving it, if circumstances don't hinder.'⁹⁰

Abstract

Creating a coherent doctrine of the fall of man requires of theologians, both past and present, an intellectual effort of Herculean proportions. Jonathan Edwards, regularly described as America's greatest theologian, struggled to present a coherent interpretation of events in the Garden of Eden that led to Adam's rejection of God's righteous plan in favor of an inferior alternative. In light of Edwards' profound work, *Freedom of the Will*, this theological dilemma becomes all the more complex. The key to Edwards' understanding of Adam's Edenic purity and his mysterious choice of rebellion is found in the doctrine of self-love wherein Adam responded to the innate principle of self-love, choosing that which appeared most pleasurable at that time.

89 Storms, 'The Will: Fettered Yet Free', 214.

90 Edwards, Resolution 11, in *Jonathan Edwards' Resolutions and Advice to Young Converts*, ed. by Stephen J. Nichols (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2001), 18.