

JONATHAN EDWARDS' ACCOUNT OF ADAM'S FIRST SIN

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For Jonathan Edwards the issue of sin's entrance into the world is complex and involved since Edwards claims that Adam was created in a state of perfect innocence or perfect righteousness.¹ Why did the inclination to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil arise in an originally sinless Adam? Clyde Holbrook, in his Introduction to the Yale edition of *Original Sin* states Edwards' problem:

Once having established Adam's original righteousness, how could he explain the take-over of the lower faculties? The withdrawal of the supernatural principles followed and did not precede or cause the fall itself. Whence then arose Adam's inclination to sin, since, by Edwards' own oft-repeated thesis, a cause must be found for every act? (*OS*, p. 51)

There is a consensus among several scholars that Edwards fails to provide an adequate account of the origin of sin.² The thesis of this

¹ 'Adam's sin, with relation to the forbidden fruit, was the first sin he committed. Which could not have been, had he not always, till then, been perfectly righteous, righteous from the first moment of his existence; and consequently, created or brought into existence righteous. In a moral agent, subject to moral obligations, it is the same thing to be perfectly innocent, as to be perfectly righteous.' See *Original Sin (OS)*, edited by Clyde A. Holbrook (New Haven, CN, 1970), p. 228.

² In *Tragedy in Eden: Original Sin in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Lanham, MD, 1985), C. Samuel Storms writes that 'there is nothing in Adam causally sufficient to explain the effect (which is his sin). If by creation he is in such a condition that, antecedent to God's withdrawal of divine influence, he necessarily sins, then God is most certainly the efficient and morally responsible cause of the transgression' (p. 223). In his review of Storms' book in *Westminster Theological Journal* 48 (1986), Samuel T. Logan Jr. agrees that 'Edwards' scheme fails to answer definitely the problem of the origin of Adam's original sin but, of course, Edwards is not alone in his failure. No one has yet solved this problem logically without implicating God in Adam's guilt. Perhaps the flaw in Edwards' approach (and in the approach of most theologians) was his assumption of too much psychological continuity between the pre-fallen Adam and the post-Fall mankind'

paper is that this view is mistaken. I will argue that Edwards does provide a coherent and adequate account of Adam's fall. It is an account made up of three major parts: (i) the distinction between 'sufficient' and 'efficacious' grace, (ii) the 'perversion' of Adam's rational will, and (iii) Adam's imperfection as a creature.

Sufficient and Efficacious Grace

Edwards' account of the origin of Adam's first sin is based in part on a distinction between two kinds of grace, viz., 'sufficient grace' and 'efficacious grace'. Edwards claims that 'God gave our first parents sufficient grace, though he withheld an efficacious grace, or a grace that should certainly uphold him in all temptations he could meet.'³ The term 'sufficient grace' (the grace of 'original righteousness') seems to have at least two meanings for Edwards. In *Original Sin* Edwards says that Adam was created with the obligation to be inclined to act rightly.

Adam was brought into existence capable of acting immediately as a moral agent; and therefore he was immediately under a rule of right action: he was obliged as soon as he existed, to act right. And if he was obliged to act right as soon as he existed, he was obliged even then to be inclined to act right. (*OS*, p. 228)

The 'rule of right action' in question was the precept about not eating the forbidden fruit. God commanded Adam to obey this precept. No one can sin without an inclination to sin; likewise no one can obey a rule without an inclination to obey a rule. From the beginning Adam was 'inclined to act right' and he possessed 'a virtuous and holy disposition of heart' (*OS*, p. 229). Thus, from the moment he was created to the moment he first sinned, Adam was perfectly righteous, *i.e.* there were no sinful inclinations in him and his actions conformed to God's law. This is the first meaning of 'sufficient grace', viz., that Adam was created with an inclination to act rightly.⁴ This is why

(p. 402). As we shall see, Clyde Holbrook, the editor of the Yale edition of *Original Sin*, and the respected Edwards scholar John Gerstner also believe that Edwards has failed to give an adequate account of Adam's 'first sin'.

³ *The Miscellanies (M)*, edited by Thomas A. Schafer (New Haven; 1994), p. 485 (*M* 436). In *M* 290 Edwards employs the terms 'original righteousness' and 'confirming grace' (p. 382).

⁴ Some have interpreted Edwards to be claiming that Adam's original righteousness is the equivalent of absolute moral perfection. Arthur Crabtree writes that 'in his claims for the perfection of Adam's will, however, Edwards went beyond anything affirmed by Augustine, Calvin, or Catholic theologians.

Edwards calls sufficient grace the grace of 'original righteousness'. Morally speaking, God, from the beginning, pointed Adam in the right direction.

In *M* 436 Edwards spells out a second meaning of 'sufficient grace':

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. (p. 485)

Edwards clarifies what it means for Adam to be free with respect to his 'whole will' and his 'rational will' by examining the relationship between the 'rational will' and 'appetite' in fallen humanity:

Now, man has as it were two wills; he has a will against a will. He has one will arising merely from a rational judgment of what is best for him; this may be called the rational will: he has another will or inclination, arising from the liveliness or intenseness of the idea, or sensibleness of the good of the object presented to the mind, which we may call appetite; which is against the other,

Augustine had asserted the ability of Adam to do right (*posse non peccare* [able not to sin]). Edwards asserts the necessity of Adamic righteousness (*non posse peccare* [not able to sin]).... This unprecedented doctrine of necessary goodness undoubtedly safeguards the absolute perfection of creation, but it renders a fall impossible, as the Arminians were quick to see.' See *Jonathan Edwards' View Of Man: A Study in Eighteenth-Century Calvinism* (Wallington, 1948), pp. 22-3.

Others have interpreted the Mosaic account of the fall to imply that Adam was created free of any guilt but not in a state of holiness. Arthur Pink claims that 'in unfallen Adam the will was free, free in both directions, free toward good and free toward evil. Adam was created in a state of innocency, but not in a state of holiness, as it is so often assumed and asserted. Adam's will was therefore in a state of moral equipoise: that is to say, in Adam there was no constraining bias in him towards either good or evil, and as such, Adam differed radically from all his descendants, as well as from "the Man Christ Jesus".' See *The Sovereignty of God*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, 1994), pp. 134-5. Edwards, on the other hand, holds that Adam's will was not originally in a state of moral equipoise but was created with a bias towards good, but not a constraining bias that would prevent him from sinning on every occasion.

rational, will, and in fallen man in his natural state overcomes it, and keeps it in subjection. (*M* 436, p. 484)

A fallen human being has a bifurcated will, 'a will against a will'. When his rational will comes into conflict with and is overcome by appetite, the rational will becomes its slave. Such slavery does not mean or imply that a fallen human being lacks freedom. Although the rational will is a slave to appetite, yet with respect to 'his whole will, compounded of these two (either arising from the addition of them together when they concur, or the excess of one above the other when they are opposite)', a fallen human being 'is always a free agent' (*M* 436, p. 484). He is still free to do as he pleases, to act on his desires, to execute his 'whole will', in the absence of any external constraints or hindrances. But 'with respect to his rational will, or that part of his inclination which arises from a mere rational judgment of what is best for himself, he is not a free agent, but is enslaved; he is a servant of sin' (*M* 436, p. 484). On the other hand, Adam's rational will was not a slave to appetite. He was free both with respect to his 'whole will' and his 'rational will'. This is what it means for Adam to have sufficient grace and it is in this sense that Edwards can claim that 'Adam's will was free in a sense that ours since the fall is not' (*M* 436, p. 484).⁵

⁵ John Gerstner believes that Edwards has not accounted for a genuine difference between unfallen and fallen man: 'The difference that seems to Edwards to obtain between unfallen and fallen man in this regard is that unfallen man had sufficient grace to choose according to his mere rational judgment while fallen man does not. It comes down to this: unfallen man could have been inclined to choose according to his rational judgment and fallen man cannot.' See *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. II (Powhatan, VA, 1992), p. 308. Gerstner thinks that fallen man can and often does 'choose according to his mere rational judgment'. For example, 'do some sinners not abstain from alcohol, which they like, because, and only because, they judge it not to be for their later good?' (p. 305).

I think Edwards would agree that sinners often make rational judgments about what they think is best for themselves and then choose and act in accordance with these judgments. For Edwards what characterizes a fallen human being is not the failure ever to make a rational judgment about what is best for himself (as previously stated, he thinks that, in a fallen human being, the 'whole will' involves either concurrence of reason and appetite, subordination of reason to appetite, or subordination of appetite to reason). Rather what characterizes a fallen human being is the

When Edwards claims that Adam was created with 'sufficient grace' or the grace of 'original righteousness' I take him to mean, then, that (i) Adam was created with an inclination to act rightly (a bias toward good), and (ii) Adam was originally a free agent with respect to his 'whole will' (he was able to do as he pleased) and his 'rational will' (his rational will was not a slave to appetite).

Granted that Adam was given sufficient grace, then what made the first sin possible? The question of the very possibility of Adam's sin would seem to be logically prior to the question of how and why he sinned. Edwards replies that 'if it be inquired how man came to sin, seeing he had no sinful inclinations in him', the reason is that 'he sinned under that temptation because God did not give him more' (*M* 290, p. 382). For Edwards the 'more' is God's 'efficacious' or 'confirming grace', that grace which is given now in heaven, such grace as shall fit the soul to surmount every temptation' (*M* 290, p. 382). What made the first sin possible, then, was the absence of efficacious or confirming grace. Adam was given grace sufficient to incline him to obey God's law and enable him not to sin. But this grace did not ensure that he would always act on this inclination.⁶

John Gerstner takes issue with Edwards' distinction between sufficient and efficacious grace. Gerstner believes that Edwards 'has a distinction here without a difference'. He claims that 'if the grace is

disposition to sin that arises from a wicked heart. It is in this sense that a fallen human being is a slave to appetite. Admittedly, I may refrain from abusing alcohol, lying about my neighbour, and stealing my neighbour's goods because I rationally judge that these acts of omission serve my short-term or long-term interests. Not all sinners abuse alcohol, lie, or steal. I think Edwards would agree that a sinner's rational will can reject this or that appetitive desire and follow reason's lead. But to say that on this or that occasion, a sinner's appetite is subordinate to reason does not imply that, in general, appetite is subordinate to reason. As a result of the fall reason became the slave of appetite in the sense that human beings with wicked hearts became prone to habitual sin. Edwards never denies that sinners make rational judgments and act on them, but he affirms that all sinners are habitual sinners, even if their sin is the sin of unbelief. On the other hand, Adam and Eve, prior to the fall, had no disposition or inclination to sin, either to habitual sin or to occasional sin.

⁶ It must be remembered that Edwards believes that God decreed the fall and that what God decrees must occur. Thus, the necessity of the fall is at odds with Adam's possession of efficacious or confirming grace.

truly sufficient it must be efficacious; if it is not efficacious it is not sufficient'.⁷ He cites *M* 501 where Edwards says that 'Adam had sufficient assistance of God always present with him to have enabled him to have obeyed if he had used his natural abilities in endeavoring it.' Gerstner thinks that unfallen Adam is in the same boat as fallen human beings. Both have the natural ability to obey God's will. However, it is not their natural ability that is in question but their inclination to obey. Gerstner does not think that the grace Adam possessed before the fall was sufficient to prevent him from falling. It was not sufficient conditionally, *i.e.*, subject to the use of natural ability; and it was not sufficient in itself. It could not be 'conditionally sufficient for unless the grace was actual which it was not, it never could be sufficient, for unless a man had efficacious grace he would not utilize his natural ability, to call on his "sufficient grace"'.⁸ And it could not be sufficient in itself for 'if Adam had efficacious grace he would not need sufficient grace and if he did not, sufficient grace would be insufficient'.⁹ According to Gerstner, then, the distinction between sufficient grace and efficacious grace is a distinction without a difference. Sufficient grace 'is a contradiction in terms; sufficient grace is insufficient. Only efficacious grace is sufficient.'¹⁰

I believe there are several reasons for questioning Gerstner's view. First, Edwards makes it clear that God was under no obligation to create Adam with 'efficacious grace'. In *The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners* he says:

That such is God's sovereign power and right, that he is originally under no obligation to keep men from sinning; but may in his providence permit and leave them to sin. He was not obliged to keep either angels or men from falling. It is unreasonable to suppose, that God should be obliged, if he makes a reasonable creature capable of knowing his will, and receiving a law from him, and being subject to his moral government, at the same time to make it impossible for him to sin, or break his law.¹¹

Edwards repeats the same point in the sermon *All God's Methods Are Most Reasonable* when he says that 'God is in no way obliged to afford his creature such grace and influence as shall render it

⁷ Gerstner, p. 306.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

¹¹ Edwards, *The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners*, reprinted in *Jonathan Edwards, Representative Selections, With Introduction, Bibliography, and Notes*, ed. by Clarence H. Faust and Thomas H. Johnson (New York, 1969), p. 117.

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.¹² Thus, it is unreasonable to suppose that God is obligated to create Adam subject to a moral law while at the same time making it impossible for him ever to break the law. If God, by reason of his 'sovereign power and right', is not so obligated, then to Adam presumably belongs *posse peccare* and *posse non peccare*. If *posse peccare* (able to sin), then there is no guarantee that Adam will stand his ground in the face of every temptation. In short, he possesses sufficient grace but he lacks efficacious grace.

Secondly, Edwards also claims that the precept forbidding the eating of the forbidden fruit 'was given for the trial of Adam's obedience' (*M* 322, p. 403). The presence of efficacious grace is inconsistent with Adam's being on trial or probation. If Adam is on trial the assumption is that he can fall. If he has efficacious grace, then he cannot fall. In addition, Edwards claims that efficacious grace is given as a reward for having fulfilled the covenant, not as a reward for being created.

When he thus confirms a creature, whether angel or man, it is by way of gracious reward for their having fulfilled his covenant. 'Tis only in a state of retribution that God is pleased graciously to oblige himself always to afford such grace that shall at all times either prevent or conquer all temptation; but he is in no way obliged to afford such grace in the state wherein he is created.¹³

In short, if Adam had fulfilled the covenant of works, then he would have been rewarded with efficacious or confirming grace, and from that moment on he would be incapable of sinning. But he had no title to efficacious grace when he was first created.

Thirdly, Edwards describes sufficient grace as an inclination to act rightly, not as an inclination always to act rightly.

God created man in a state of innocency, and gave him such grace that he was perfectly free from any corruption 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

¹² See *All God's Methods Are Most Reasonable* in *Sermons and Discourses, 1723-1729*, edited by Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven, 1997), p. 167.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 167-8. In *M* 290 Edwards says that efficacious grace 'was the grace Adam was to have had if he had stood, when he came to receive his reward. This grace God was not obliged to grant him' (p. 382).

him when his time of probation was over, if he had continued innocent during that probation.¹⁴

An inclination is a volitional tendency or disposition to act in a certain way. But there is nothing in the notion of an inclination which entails that the person possessing the inclination will always act in a certain way. I may have an inclination to laugh when someone is deliberately being facetious, but if I am in a sour mood I may not laugh at all. Sufficient grace is a tendency or inclination to act rightly. It is a bias toward good, not a compulsion to act rightly. It is not a grace that will prevent a person 'from giving way to any temptation'. Thus, it does not follow, as Gerstner alleges, that 'if the grace is truly sufficient it must be efficacious'. There is a sense in which sufficient grace is, as Gerstner alleges, insufficient. It does not enable a person to refrain from sin on every occasion. Admittedly, if grace is efficacious, then it must be sufficient. But it can be sufficient without being efficacious.

Fourthly, if God had created Adam not only with the grace whereby he was inclined to act rightly but, in addition, the grace whereby he was able to surmount every temptation, how could Adam be meaningfully subject to 'commands, laws, promises or threatenings'?¹⁵ God threatened Adam with death if he should sin. The threat is empty if Adam is unable to sin. And if God had created Adam with efficacious grace, this would have placed him on a par, morally speaking, with Christ himself, the 'second Adam', the only man who was able to surmount every temptation. Adam would have been both created and sustained as a morally perfect being. It seems reasonable, then, that Adam's inclination to act rightly (which God implanted in him) was an inclination to act rightly, a bias toward good, not an inclination always to act rightly. In short, sufficient grace is not efficacious grace.

The Perversion of Adam's Rational Will

Why, then, did Adam sin? Edwards claims that Adam sinned because his rational will became 'perverted'. Adam's judgment was deceived because what he thought was best for himself was, in fact, not best for himself.

Therefore man, having that sufficient grace as to render him quite free with respect to his rational will (or his will arising from mere judgment of what was best for himself), could not fall without having that judgment deceived, and being made to think that to be best for himself which was not so, and so having his rational will perverted (*M*

¹⁴ *All God's Methods*, p. 168.

¹⁵ *The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners*, p. 167.

436, pp. 485-6). Adam judged that by eating the forbidden fruit he and Eve would become like gods and that what God had threatened was not true. Though these were erroneous judgments, they were still rational judgments. Adam and Eve had a reason for making them. In *M* 173, Edwards notes that, according to the Genesis account, Satan chose the serpent to be the instrument of temptation 'because of his subtlety' (*M* 173 p. 324). The serpent lacked speech but 'pretended he had gotten it by eating the fruit of the forbidden tree' (*M* 173, p. 324). Eve surmised that if eating the fruit of the forbidden tree turned the serpent into a rational being with speech, then eating the fruit would enable her and Adam to be 'as gods knowing good and evil' (*M* 173, p. 325). By pretending to be concerned about her welfare, by describing the positive effects that eating the forbidden fruit would have on her, the serpent 'easily gained Eve's belief' (*M* 173, p. 325). Eve's judgment was erroneous but it was still a rational judgment about what Eve thought was, at that moment, best for herself. Eve believed that by eating the forbidden fruit she was acting in her rational self-interest.

Edwards maintains, however, that the perversion of Adam's will did not blind his conscience. Adam still knew that it was wrong to violate the precept about the forbidden fruit.

Though he might sin without being deceived in his rational judgment of what was most lovely in itself, or (which is the same thing) without having his conscience deceived and blinded, might rationally know at the same time, that what he was about to do was hateful, unworthy, *etc.*; or in other words, though he might know that it was what he ought not to do. (*M* 436, pp. 485-6)

Edwards distinguishes between a person's 'judgment of what is best for himself' and a 'judgment of what is best absolutely, and most lovely in itself' (*M* 436, p. 485). He says that what is best absolutely or what is absolutely lovely directly influences only the will of appetite but can indirectly influence the rational will (when the person judges that what is best absolutely is also best for himself). But a person may also judge that what is best absolutely is not best for himself. When this happens the judgment of the rational will is deceived. A person 'with respect to his rational will, may be perfectly free, and yet may refuse that which he at the same time judges to be in itself most lovely and becoming, and will that which he rationally knows to be hateful' (*M* 436, p. 485). Thus, Adam judged that something that was in itself most lovely and becoming (obeying God's law) was not best for himself and so he chose to sin and break God's law (something he knew was hateful and wrong). Thus, he was not deceived about the wrongness of disobeying God's law, though he was deceived when he believed that disobeying God's law was best for

himself. This latter belief reflected an erroneous (though rational) judgment, but not one that blinded his conscience. In short, the serpent did not cause Adam and Eve to cast doubt on what God had commanded, only on what they judged to be best for themselves.

In *M* 437 Edwards describes the situation of Adam and Eve when tempted by the serpent. In order for them to have 'grace sufficient to their being free with respect to their rational will, and in order to their being without habitual sin', they must have a 'sense of spiritual excellencies and beauties' (*M* 437, p. 486). Here Edwards is referring to a 'sense' of duty to God and love of duty to God. These are the superior or supernatural principles God implanted in Adam and Eve when he created them and which God withdrew when the fall occurred (*OS*, p. 381). What ruled the natural appetite and rational will of Adam and Eve, then, was the 'sense' of duty to God or 'holy inclination to obedience' (*M* 437, p. 486). As stated earlier, Adam was created with an inclination to act rightly, with a bias toward good. The lower appetites and the rational will fall under the inferior or natural principles God implanted in Adam and Eve and which remained with them after the fall. Before Adam and Eve sinned the inferior principles were subordinate and served the superior principles: 'These superior principles were given to possess the throne, and maintain an absolute dominion in the heart: the other, to be wholly subordinate or subservient' (*OS*, p. 382). After the fall 'the inferior principles of self-love and natural appetite, which were given only to serve, being alone, and left to themselves, of course became reigning principles; having no superior principles to regulate or control them, they became absolute masters of the heart' (*OS*, p. 382).

When Adam's rational will was 'perverted', the erroneous judgment concerning what was best for himself combined with his natural appetite, and the two, acting in concert with one another, overcame the 'holy inclination' to obey God's precept.

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. (*M* 436, p. 487)

Natural appetite by itself was insufficient to account for the first sin, for God had created Adam with 'sufficient grace' or the grace of 'original righteousness', a grace that made it possible for Adam's rational will to have dominion over appetite. But natural appetite found a welcome ally in the erroneous judgment that resulted from the perversion of Adam's rational will. Together they (natural appetite and

an erroneous judgment) 'overthrew the gracious inclination'. The superior principles helped Adam's rational will keep appetite in check. But Adam was not created with 'efficacious' or 'confirming grace', the grace necessary to surmount every temptation. He was created holy, but not in a confirmed state of holiness. Since he lacked confirming grace, 'the disposition of heart to do the right thing the first moment of his existence' did not guarantee his doing the right thing every moment of his existence.

In *Original Sin* Edwards claims in a footnote that 'although there was no natural sinful inclination in Adam, yet an inclination to that sin of eating the forbidden fruit, was begotten in him by the delusion and error he was led into; and this inclination to eat the forbidden fruit, must precede his actual eating' (*OS* pp. 228-9). Clyde Holbrook, in his Introduction to the Yale edition of *Original Sin*, claims that Edwards is engaged in the aforementioned footnote in circular reasoning. 'How,' Holbrook asks, 'could a delusion be "begotten in him" or how could he be "led into" delusion without presupposing a sinful propensity to which the temptation could appeal?' (*OS*, p. 51).

I do not think Edwards is engaged in circular reasoning. If by 'a sinful propensity to which the temptation could appeal' Holbrook means a fixed tendency or settled disposition, then Edwards is not engaged in circular reasoning for he makes it very clear that a single sinful inclination does not presuppose or imply a fixed or settled disposition to do wrong.

'Tis true, as was observed before, there is no effect without some cause, occasion, ground or reason of that effect, and some cause answerable to that effect. But certainly it will not follow, from thence, that a transient effect requires a permanent cause, or a fixed influence and propensity. (*OS*, p. 191)

Edwards clearly regards the 'first sin' as a transient effect.

And however great the sin of Adam, or of the angels, was, and however great means, motives and obligations they sinned against; whatever may be thence argued concerning the transient cause, occasion, or temptation, as being very subtle, remarkably tending to deceive and seduce, or otherwise great; yet it argues nothing of any settled disposition, or fixed cause at all, either great or small; the effect both in the angels and our first parents, being in itself transient, and for aught appears, happening in each of them, under one system or coincidence of influential circumstances. (*OS*, p. 193)

There was no 'settled' disposition, then, at the root of Adam's inclination to commit the first sin.

If by 'sinful propensity to which the temptation could appeal' Holbrook means not a fixed or settled disposition to do wrong but

simply an individual desire or inclination to do wrong, then I think Edwards would say that Adam's rational will could have been deceived without presupposing the presence of such a propensity. The first sinful inclination was begotten in Adam by reason of a 'coincidence of influential circumstances', viz., an erroneous judgment about what was best for himself finding a welcome ally in the natural appetite. This is how the first sinful inclination came about. A sinful action presupposes a sinful inclination but a sinful inclination does not necessarily presuppose a sinful heart (except in fallen human beings). Just as one can acquire bad habits, one can acquire bad inclinations. But acquiring a bad inclination does not presuppose already having a bad inclination.

Imperfection in the Creature

In *Freedom of the Will* Edwards claims that sin comes into the world 'from the imperfection which properly belongs to a creature, as such', that '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.'¹⁶ Holbrook regards this as 'a damaging concession, inasmuch as imperfections in the creature as created would redound only to the discredit of the Creator' (*OS*, p. 51). Gerstner agrees:

Edwards is speaking of man as created good. He is also saying that man cannot stand on his own moral feet. It is a case of *posse peccare* only; there is logically no room for *posse non peccare*. Unless God overcomes this imperfection; it cannot be overcome by the man himself because it belongs to his very nature as a creature.

Augustine does not escape this either and perhaps no profound Christian thinker can.¹⁷ Once again I must disagree. If Adam is created such that he is determined to hold his ground in the face of every temptation, then it is as if he has been programmed by God to be always inclined to do the right thing. In the abstract it is logically possible for God to create a being who is always so inclined, but in the context of Edwards' theology, where God is absolutely sovereign and human beings are utterly dependent on him for their very existence, being a creature means having imperfections, one of which is a mutable will. God cannot create beings exactly like himself lest the creator / creature distinction collapse entirely. If Adam is forever a morally perfect being, then it stands to reason that his descendants are

¹⁶ *Freedom of the Will*, edited by Paul Ramsey (New Haven, 1957), p. 413.

¹⁷ Gerstner, p. 314.

morally perfect beings and there is no need for a redeemer, no need for the cross, no need to demonstrate God's justice and mercy. It is difficult to see why it discredits God if he creates Adam with sufficient grace while at the same time withholding efficacious grace.

Holbrook further contends that Edwards attempted another explanation of the origin of the first sin when he identified original righteousness with innocence (which Holbrook equates, I believe mistakenly, with ignorance). He quotes Edwards as saying that the serpent led Adam and Eve to believe 'that their disobedience should be followed with no destruction or calamity at all to themselves (and therefore not to their posterity) but on the contrary, with a great increase and advancement of dignity and happiness' (*OS*, p. 193). Adam and Eve were ignorant of the ultimate consequences of eating the forbidden fruit and so their sin can be traced to ignorance on their part. Holbrook maintains that if the first sin is due to ignorance, then Edwards is faced with a dilemma. Either his position leads back to the 'contention that the original parents sinned in the same manner in which all men do, by errors of judgment made in ignorance of consequences, and with free exercise of choice; or it leads to a condemning of God's creatorship, since he knew beforehand that ignorance would lead to this disastrous consequence' (*OS*, p. 52).

I think this interpretation also misses the mark. First, it is not entirely evident that all men and women sin because they make errors of judgment based on ignorance of the consequences of their acts. I think Edwards would say that all natural human beings sin because they have a wicked heart. Secondly, while Edwards does say that Adam and Eve were ignorant of the ultimate consequences of their sin, viz., death to themselves and their posterity, he also claims that the Mosaic account of their temptation reveals that they were only initially deceived. Their temptation was 'so contrived by the subtlety of the tempter, as first to blind and deceive 'em' (*OS*, p. 193). But they were not victims of a total or lasting deception. It does not follow from their initially being deceived that their sin was totally and completely the result of ignorance. As previously stated Adam was not deceived in his judgment about what was 'best absolutely', viz., obeying God's law. He was only deceived when he believed that disobeying God's law was 'best for himself'. The perversion of his rational will did not blind his conscience.

Adam and Eve were certainly taken in and led astray by the serpent but they still experienced an obligation to obey the precept about not eating the forbidden fruit. Their being deceived did not remove their culpability. They still knew it was wrong to eat the forbidden fruit. They may have been ignorant of the ultimate consequences of their sin but they were not ignorant of their obligation

to obey God's law. A child may be ignorant of the consequences of breaking one of his parents' rules but he still knows it is wrong to break the rule. If Adam and Eve were not ignorant of their obligation, then God had foreknowledge that they were not ignorant and thus it is difficult to see how God's creatorship can be condemned. In Edwards' view, tracing the first sin to ignorance does not provide an adequate explanation of sin's entrance into the world.

Conclusions

I believe Edwards' account of the origin of Adam's first sin is coherent and adequate. God created Adam with sufficient grace, the grace of original righteousness, which inclined him to act rightly and enabled him to keep appetite subordinate to the rational will. But God withheld efficacious grace, which he was not obligated to bestow upon him, and which, had he granted it to him, would have made Adam a morally perfect being able to withstand any and every temptation to sin. The absence of confirming grace accounted for the possibility of the first sin.

Edwards' account rests on the belief that God created Adam as a free agent not only with respect to his 'whole will' but also with respect to his 'rational will'. Adam sinned because his rational will became 'perverted' when he made an erroneous judgment about what was 'best for himself'. This judgment found a natural ally in the lower appetite and, acting together, they overcame and overthrew the 'holy inclination' to obey God's precept. The first sin entered the world, then, as a result of the alliance between an erroneous judgment and the natural appetite.

In Edwards' view the disobedience of Adam was ultimately a function of his imperfection as a creature, yet the first sin was not entirely the result of ignorance. Adam's rational will became 'perverted' but his conscience was never blinded, since from the moment he was created he experienced the obligation to obey God's commands.

Finally, Edwards believes that, in the larger scheme of things, from the point of view of God's overall designs and purposes, the first sin, however evil when considered in itself, reflects the goodness of God, occasioning as it does a more intimate relationship between God and humanity and a greater manifestation of God's love for his people than would have occurred had Adam not sinned.

If man had never fallen, God would have remained man's friend; he would have enjoyed God's favor, and so would have been the object of Christ's favor, as he would have had the favor of all the persons of the Trinity. But now Christ becoming our surety and Savior, and having taken on him our nature, occasions between

Christ and us a union of a quite different kind, and a nearer relation than otherwise would have been. The fall is the occasion of Christ's becoming our head, and the church his body. And believers are become his brethren, and spouse, in a manner that otherwise would not have been. God now manifests his love to his people, by sending his Son into the world, to die for them. There never would have been any such testimony of the love of God, if man had not fallen. Christ manifests his love, by coming into the world, and laying down his life. This is the greatest testimony of divine love that can be conceived. Now, surely, the greater discoveries God's people have of his love to them, the more occasion they will have to rejoice in that love. Here will be a delightful theme for the saints to contemplate to all eternity which they never could have had, if man had never fallen, viz., the dying love of Christ.¹⁸

Better for Adam to have fallen than for human beings to have missed the chance of experiencing 'the greatest testimony of divine love'. Edwards is clearly in that tradition of Christian theologians who adhere to the doctrine of the *felix culpa*.

¹⁸ See *Wisdom Displayed in Salvation*, reprinted in *The Works of President Edwards*, vol. IV (New York, 1881), pp. 154-5.