

# The Human Person as Communicative Event: Jonathan Edwards on the Mind/Body Relationship

Marc Cortez  
Western Seminary – Portland, OR

Presented at the Center of Philosophy and Religion  
University of Notre Dame  
May 5, 2012

DRAFT VERSION – PLEASE DO NOT CITE

Jonathan Edwards' metaphysics has received quite a bit of attention from people writing on issues like idealism, empiricism, dispositionalism, Neoplatonism, occasionalism, panentheism, and theocentrism, to name just a few.<sup>1</sup> And other researchers have delved into anthropological issues like his view of the affections, volition, free will, and original sin.<sup>2</sup> But, as far as I can tell, relatively little attention has been given to the ways in which Edwards' general ontology impacts his approach to human ontology—in particular, his view of the mind/body relationship.

Given that Edwards is well known for his idealist ontology and his hostility to materialism in any form, he might seem like an unusual dialog partner for today.<sup>3</sup> But I think Edwards' particular understanding of the mind/body problem is informative for three reasons. First, the very fact that he has a rather different approach to the mind/body relationship means that his ontology offers an opportunity to see the issues from a different perspective. That in itself makes his anthropological ontology worth considering.

---

<sup>1</sup> For examples of each of these approaches to Edwards, see Leon Chai, *Jonathan Edwards and the Limits of Enlightenment Philosophy* (Oxford: OUP, 1998); Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (Meridian, 1959); Sang Hyun Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Stephen H. Daniel, "Edwards' Occasionalism," in *Jonathan Edwards as Contemporary*, edited by Don Schweitzer, 1-14 (New York: Peter Lang, 2010); Oliver Crisp, "Jonathan Edwards' Panentheism," in *Jonathan Edwards as Contemporary*, edited by Don Schweitzer, 107-125 (New York: Peter Lang, 2010); and Michael J. McClymond, "God the Measure: Towards an Understanding of Jonathan Edwards' Theocentric Metaphysics," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 47.1 (1994): 43-59.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., John E. Smith, "Editor's Introduction," *WJE* 2:1-83; Perry Miller, "Jonathan Edwards and the Sense of the Heart," *Harvard Theological Review* 41 (1948): 123-45; Norman Fiering, "Will and Intellect in the New England Mind," *William and Mary Quarterly* 29 (1972): 516-58; Allen C. Guelzo, *Edwards on the Will: A Century of American Theological Debate* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008); and Oliver Crisp, *Jonathan Edwards And The Metaphysics Of Sin*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Although, as Wallace Anderson states, "there is no evidence that he studied the work of any recognized materialist" during the period in which he developed the basics of his ontology, (Wallace Anderson, "Editor's Introduction," *WJE* 6:54), Edwards viewed materialism as a direct threat to historic Christian doctrines like the existence of the soul, heaven and hell, angels and demons, and the very being of God himself.

Second, although Edwards' metaphysics can be understood in several different ways, it seems likely, as we will see, that he should be viewed as affirming some form of panentheism.<sup>4</sup> Given the growing popularity of panentheistic ontologies for understanding both the God/world and mind/body problems,<sup>5</sup> studying Edwards may offer insight into the unique strengths and weaknesses of this approach to the mind/body relationship.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, at the end of the essay, I will make a few comments about the unique strengths that Edwards' ontology offers for understanding the human person.

The essay will unfold in three sections. First, I will summarize Edwards' general metaphysics as the necessary background for understanding his ontology of the human person. Then I will explain Edwards' particular approach to the mind/body relationship. And, finally, I will draw a few conclusions about the significance of Edwards' ontology for today. Although I will argue that Edwards' approach comes with some important strengths, I will also point out several areas that need to be addressed before an Edwardsian ontology can be a viable candidate for understanding the mind/body relationship today.

## Life, the Universe, and Everything

To understand Edwards' ontology of the human person, we need first to discuss his approach to ontology in general. Given the range and diversity of Edwards' metaphysical writings, however, that is a daunting task. So my comments in this section will be necessarily brief and will run the risk of raising more questions than they answer. Nonetheless, before we can turn to the mind/body question, we will need some idea of how Edwards understands the God/world relationship in general.

### 1. God as Absolute Being

Edwards has a radically theocentric ontology.<sup>7</sup> In his early essay "On Being," Edwards offered an argument for the existence of God based on the premise that it is absolutely necessary that some being exist. And this necessary being must also be eternal, omnipresent, and immaterial. Which, of course, means that this being is God himself.

---

<sup>4</sup> See esp. Crisp, "Jonathan Edwards' Panentheism."

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Ian Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990); *Nature, Human Nature, and God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002); Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke, *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God's Presence in a Scientific World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); and Arthur Peacocke *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming—Natural and Divine* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> We need to keep in mind, of course, that panentheism comes in a variety of different forms. So Edwards' ontology merely illustrates how one panentheistic approach to mind/body issues functions.

<sup>7</sup> See McClymond, "God the Measure."

But Edwards takes this a step further by claiming that we could also identify this necessary, eternal being with “space,” even going so far as to say that “space is God.”<sup>8</sup> This suggests that Edwards’ views God as the field of being in which all other things find existence. Everything exists “in” God. Although this is an early essay and Edwards does not make much use of this spatial analogy elsewhere, the idea that creation finds its being “in” God will remain prominent throughout his writings.

From this, we can appreciate why Edwards argues that God is the only true substance. For Edwards, *substance* in its most proper sense refers to “something that really and properly subsists by itself and supports all properties.”<sup>9</sup> So, for Edwards, two criteria must hold for something to qualify as a true substance. First, it “subsists by itself.” In other words, it cannot receive its being from some other entity. And second, it is that which supports all properties, and, therefore, is not itself a property of some other substance.

From what we saw above, though, only God meets the first criterion. Clearly all created beings fail to subsist in themselves since they depend on God’s necessary being for their existence. And, as I will argue later, God alone meets the second criterion as well. So, for Edwards, “Speaking strictly there is no proper substance but God himself.”<sup>10</sup>

Thus, Edwards has a radically God-shaped ontology. God is the only true substance in the world, the necessary ground of all being. As Michael McClymond and Gerald McDermott state, “If there is a single theme that draws together the many disparate lines of thought in Edwards’s metaphysical and scientific writings, it might well be theocentrism. For Edwards, God was the measure of all things.”<sup>11</sup> Or, as Edwards states, “God is the prime and original being, the first and last, and the pattern of all, and has the sum of all perfection.”<sup>12</sup>

But what does that mean for the reality of non-divine things? Is there any sense in which we can talk about bodies and souls have any real, substantial existence? Or does Edwards collapse created reality so completely into the being of God that there remains no real distinction?

---

<sup>8</sup> *WJE* 6:203

<sup>9</sup> *WJE* 6:125

<sup>10</sup> *WJE* 6:215. From this, we can easily see why Edwards would have significant reservations with both materialism and dualism since each affirms that some aspect of created reality can be viewed as a substance. The material world cannot be a true substance in this sense of the term since this would entail that the material world itself is this eternal, self-existent, and necessary being. But that means the material world would be God, something that Edwards explicitly rejects (*WJE* 6:235). Dualism runs into the same problem insofar as it affirms the substantial reality of the material world. But it also affirms another (immaterial) substance. But, for Edwards, this is also unacceptable since it would make things like angels and human souls into self-subsistent realities.

<sup>11</sup> Michael J. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: OUP, 2011), 106.

<sup>12</sup> *WJE* 6:363.

### 3. The Material World as Divine Event

In his essay “On Atoms,” Edwards argued that what we call “physical” things are nothing more than the ways in which conscious beings perceive a particular kind of God’s actions. When we perceive something to be “physical,” we are simply noting that it is solid—i.e. it resists being penetrated by other physical things. So I perceive my desk and my coffee cup both to be “physical” because, when I place the cup on the desk, they resist each other—i.e. the cup does not penetrate the desk. But Edwards argues that this resistance is not actually a property of some underlying physical substance. Instead, it is the direct expression of God’s power. The “solidity” is nothing other than God creating “resistances” in this particular place and time. So what I perceive to be two “material” objects is actually the very activity of God. Thus, as Edwards’ says “the substance of bodies at last becomes either nothing, or nothing but the Deity acting in that particular manner in those parts of space where he thinks fit.”<sup>13</sup>

But Edwards presses the idea that we exist “in” God even further. For Edwards, “nothing has any existence anywhere else but in consciousness.”<sup>14</sup> This is because all the properties of material bodies require some conscious being for their expression. What does it mean to say that a body has the property of being red except to say that the body has appeared to some conscious being in such a way as to elicit the perceptual experience of redness? Similarly, what does it mean to say that a body is “in motion,” except to say that some conscious being perceives that the relation of the body relative to other bodies has changed? And Edwards argues that this is true of all the properties of material bodies. But, as we’ve seen, Edwards did not assume that there must be some “substance” lying behind or beneath these perceived properties. Instead, he contended that the essential reality of material bodies lies in their being perceived by conscious beings.<sup>15</sup> Thus, “the material universe exists only in the mind.”<sup>16</sup>

So, for Edwards, a material body is simply the result of God acting in such a way as to produce the experience of certain properties in the mind of some conscious perceiver. But this means that a material body is much more of an “act” or “event”<sup>17</sup> than it is a “thing” or “substance.” Although Edwards will still refer to material things as

---

<sup>13</sup> *WJE* 6:215.

<sup>14</sup> *WJE* 6:204

<sup>15</sup> Edwards argues that we tend to think of material beings as substances because we recognize that something must cause and uphold the properties that we perceive, but we fail to realize that God himself is the “something” that lies behind the properties (*WJE* 6:380).

<sup>16</sup> *WJE* 6:368. McClymond and McDermott contend that Edward’s idealism “was simply an extension of Edwards’s theological conviction that God’s glory, to be truly glorious, must reverberate in the hearts and mind of his creatures” (*The Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 115).

<sup>17</sup> I realize that by introducing “event” language here, I run the risk of reading Barthian presuppositions into Edwards’ theology. Nonetheless, Edwards’ emphasis on the fact that material beings are essentially divine actions, particularly when combined with Edwards’ occasionalism, suggests that “event” is an apt description.

substances on occasion, he has radically redefined what he means by the term.

But an event-oriented ontology like this would seem to rob the material world of having any meaningful existence of its own. Although Edwards would agree that the material world does not (and should not) have any existence “of its own,” he does allow for the material world to have a particular mode of existence. As he describes it,

And indeed, the secret lies here: that which truly is the substance of all bodies is the infinitely exact and precise and perfectly stable idea in God's mind, together with his stable will that the same shall gradually be communicated to us, and to other minds, according to certain fixed and exact established methods and laws: or in somewhat different language, the infinitely exact and precise divine idea, together with an answerable, perfectly exact, precise and stable will with respect to correspondent communications to created minds, and effects on their minds.<sup>18</sup>

So, despite the dynamism of Edwards’ event-ontology, there are two stable elements grounding the existence of my desk: the “perfectly stable idea in God’s mind” and the “fixed and exact established methods and laws.” In other words, God has a stable idea of my desk, and he has established certain laws by which he consistently chooses to convey that stable idea to my consciousness so that I can have the perceptual experience of my desk that I am now having. These two things mean that my desk has a stable existence. And indeed, Edwards’ does not deny that material things have “substance,” as long as we understand that substance to be God’s own action: the “very substance of the body... is nothing but the divine power, or rather the constant exertion of it.”<sup>19</sup> So Edwards can use substance-language when speaking of material objects, though in a highly nuanced manner.

This framework also helps explain how Edwards deals with the question of whether my desk continues to exist even when no conscious being is in the room to perceive it. Edwards does not want to say that the desk continues to “exist” simply because it remains a stable idea in God’s mind. Instead, Edwards draws on the notion that everything in the material world is connected. So my desk stands in a particular relationship with everything else in my office. And all of that, in turn, stands in a particular relationship with the rest of my house. So, even when I’m in the kitchen and perceive only the contents of that room, God has chosen to constitute my perceptual experience of the kitchen in a way that “supposes” the existence of my office and the desk it contains. For Edwards, even the minutest particle in the universe stands in some relation and has some impact on everything else. So my conscious experience of my

---

<sup>18</sup> *WJE* 6:344.

<sup>19</sup> *WJE* 6:351.

kitchen presupposes the existence of everything that exists in the universe.<sup>20</sup>

And this “supposition” is done in accordance with the patterns of God’s consistent action. So, although the desk doesn’t have the same kind of existence that it would if I were directly experiencing it, it maintains a kind of virtual existence that comes through the stable idea in God’s mind expressing itself through consistently determined laws or patterns in God’s creative activity.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, material beings are nothing more than God acting in such a way that conscious beings experience the properties that we associate with material things. But, for Edwards, this means that “the universe is created out of nothing every moment.”<sup>22</sup> Since the material world is not comprised of enduring substances, there is nothing to “continue” from one moment to the next. Every moment, the entire universe receives being a new act of God. But this re-creation is not an arbitrary act whereby the universe in the next moment might be radically discontinuous with the universe in the present moment. God still has his “stable idea” of the universe, and he still acts according to the fixed and law-like patterns that he has established. Thus, the universe that he creates in the next moment flows from and is consistent with the state of the universe in the present moment, even though there is no direct casual link between the two states of the universe other than the divine act itself.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> It may be fair to say that Edwards views the entire universe as a interconnected set of properties that is, to some degree, perceived all at once by any conscious being. Thus, the entire universe finds its being in the mind of any conscious knower.

<sup>21</sup> Sang Hyun Lee explains Edwards’ ontology as “as a dynamic network of dispositional forces and habits” (*The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 4). “When God creates an entity, what he does is essentially to establish a nexus of laws” (79) that are “ontologically abiding powers” possessing “a mode of reality even when not in exercise” (7). Thus, these powers continue to exist irrespective of whether they are in any conscious mind (60). Although Lee’s account is helpful in a number of respects, I remain unconvinced that Edwards thinks of material beings as having any kind of existence apart from consciousness. As Edwards states, things exist “nowhere else but either in created or uncreated consciousness” (*WJE* 6:204) and “all existence is mental” (*WJE* 6:341). It seems more likely, as Oliver Crisp argues, that Edwards views material beings as “simply bundles of attributes that continue to exist through the constant activity of God.” (“Jonathan Edwards’ Ontology: A Critique of Sang Hyun Lee’s Dispositional Account of Edwardsian Metaphysics,” *Religious Studies* 45 (2009): 6). Their continuous being when not directly perceived by human consciousness is grounded in the “stable idea” of the divine and in creaturely consciousness as the necessary supposition of what we do perceive.

<sup>22</sup> *WJE* 6:241. Elsewhere he states, “Tis certain with me that the world exists anew every moment, that the existence of things every moment ceases and every moment is renewed” (*WJE* 13:288).

<sup>23</sup> Here again Lee appeals to dispositional states as “abiding” principles to avoid the conclusion that Edwards was a true occasionalist. Although God does move the universe “from virtuality to full actuality” every moment, the established laws endure (*The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 63). But, as I have argued, the “abiding” aspect of the universe comes from God’s consistent action, not from anything inherent in the created world. So Edwards does see the universe as created anew every moment, but this does not mean that its successive states are entirely unrelated. (See also Norman Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Thought and Its British Context* (University of North Carolina Press, 1981), pp. 270-280, 307-308; Oliver Crisp “How ‘Occasional’ Was Edwards, in *Jonathan Edwards: Philosophical Theologian*, edited by Paul Helm and Holiver Crisp, 61-77 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); and Stephen H. Daniel,

#### 4. The Immaterial World as Conscious Event

But most of what we've said thus far refers to specifically to non-conscious, material bodies. Such a body is clearly not a proper substance because "it is absolutely dependent on the conception of the mind for its existence."<sup>24</sup> But these are not the only kinds of entities in the world. What about conscious entities? They play an important role in Edwards' ontology. What can we say about their ontological status? Could they qualify as proper substances in Edwards' sense?

As Oliver Crisp points out, it is entirely possible to maintain Edwards' idealist view of the material world and still believe in the existence of immaterial substances.<sup>25</sup> So he argues that Edwards is best understood as affirming "an ontology where there are uncreated and, in a qualified sense, created substances (i.e. divine and human minds)."<sup>26</sup> But what exactly does it mean to refer to a created mind as a substance, even in a qualified sense? Since created minds not self-subsistent—they too must be re-created every moment—they clearly fail to meet Edwards' first criterion for being a substance. But maybe human minds can still be that which supports particular properties (Edwards' second criterion). It could be that created minds are substances that God creates every moment as the ground for their particular properties. Thus, although created minds would not be true substances, but they could be substances in a qualified sense.

And Edwards does refer to created minds and spirits in ways that would suggest that Crisp's reading is correct. In "On Being," he contrasts spirits and material beings by saying, "spirits only are properly substance."<sup>27</sup> And in another place, "spirits are much more properly beings, and more substantial, than bodies."<sup>28</sup> And, in both cases, the difference is that bodies depend on created minds for their being, but created minds do not depend on any other created thing for their being.

Nonetheless, in Edwards' ontology, we should not view created minds as immaterial substances that bear properties. Indeed, I think this is to make the same mistake with minds that Edwards thinks we so commonly make with respect to material bodies—namely, recognizing that something must lie behind the properties, but failing to realize that the "something" is God himself. For Edwards, the essential property of created minds is consciousness: "A mind or spirit is nothing else but consciousness."<sup>29</sup> It would be most consistent with the rest of Edwards' ontology to conclude that human

---

"Edwards' Occasionalism," in *Jonathan Edwards as Contemporary*, edited by Don Schweitzer, 1-14 (New York: Peter Lang, 2010)).

<sup>24</sup> *WJE* 6:368

<sup>25</sup> Crisp, "Jonathan Edwards' Ontology," 6.

<sup>26</sup> Crisp, "Jonathan Edwards' Ontology," 8.

<sup>27</sup> *WJE* 6:206.

<sup>28</sup> *WJE* 6:238.

<sup>29</sup> *WJE* 6:342.

minds are simply the direct action of God to produce the property of consciousness in the world moment-by-moment. Thus, God creates material beings by producing the properties of material bodies (e.g. solidity) and at the same time produces the properties of immaterial minds (consciousness) to perceive those material properties. Thus, created minds are still “more substantial” than material bodies in that they are conscious knowers, and thus closer to God’s own being, but they are not true substances either as self-subsistent entities or as that which lies behind particular properties.

Created minds, then, are no less “events” than material bodies. Indeed, the two are part of the same event in which God creates a world to be known and minds to do the knowing. And, in this sense, we can understand Edwards’ ontology as a communicative event.<sup>30</sup> In the creative act, God communicates his own glory through the properties of the material world to created minds. As we noted earlier, Edwards’ ontology is radically theocentric.

## **The Law of the Union Between Soul and Body**

Now that we’ve developed some understanding of Edwards’ general ontology, it remains for us to consider what this has to do with his understanding of the mind/body relationship in particular. Probably the best summary of Edwards’ understanding of the mind/body relationship comes from his discussion of original sin:

Again, the body and soul of a man are one, in a very different manner, and for different purposes. Considered in themselves, they are exceeding different beings, of a nature as diverse as can be conceived; and yet, by a very peculiar divine constitution or law of nature, which God has been pleased to establish, they are strongly united, and become one, in most important respects; a wonderful mutual communication is established; so that both become different parts of the same man. But the union and mutual communication they have, has existence, and is entirely regulated and limited, according to the sovereign pleasure of God, and the constitution he has been pleased to establish.”<sup>31</sup>

From this summary, we can see that Edwards viewed the human person as comprising two things with radically different natures—body and soul—which are united by God in a particular order to constitute one human person. And the language that he uses here is surprisingly traditional, almost Cartesian. It’s only when you understand this description in the context of his overall ontology that you begin to see how radically different his

---

<sup>30</sup> On the importance of “communication” for understanding Edwards’ ontology, see Stephen H. Daniel, *The Philosophy of Jonathan Edwards: A Study in Divine Semiotics* (Indiana University Press, 1994).

<sup>31</sup> *WJE* 3:398



conception of the human person is from both materialism and substance dualism.

## **1. The Radically Different Natures of Soul and Body**

We have already addressed most of what needs to be said regarding the fundamentally different natures of soul and body. The basic difference that the soul is conscious and the body is not. In other words, like all other “material” things, the human body is the moment-by-moment product of God’s activity in a particular time and place to create a phenomenal experience for conscious beings. And the soul is the moment-by-moment product of God’s activity in a particular time and place to receive that phenomenal experience.

Thus, at the most basic level, there is no ontological difference between the mind and the body. Neither are proper substances, and both are equally and continuously the result of God’s creative activity. Indeed, Edwards’ spends far more time discussing the relationship between God and creation because he seems to view this as the only fundamental ontological distinction.

The real difference between soul and body, then, is one of function. Edwards’ event-ontology means that every moment God directly produces the world as an expression of his own glory. Bodies and souls together constitute the two inseparable moments in that one event. In the first moment, God acts so as to make his glory available, and in the second he makes his glory consciously perceived.<sup>32</sup>

But Edwards can also talk about body and soul as being different with respect to their relative properties. Bodies have properties like color, solidity, and location. Souls, on the other hand, have none of these properties and are purely conscious beings.

The sharp differentiation between soul and body becomes even more clear when we consider the possibility of body/soul separation, which Edwards maintains is the state of the human person in heaven.<sup>33</sup> We don’t know much about the nature of such a state, but the fact that it is possible confirms that body and soul are very different entities.

Thus, although body and soul are ontologically similar in being God’s own actions, they comprise different sets of properties that serve different functions in Edwards’ ontology.

## **2. The Union of Soul and Body**

Despite these differences, body and soul are still united in a single human person. As Edwards says, “the appellative, ‘man’, or the proper name of any particular man, is

---

<sup>32</sup> The extent to which God’s glory is communicated to created minds is, of course, limited by the finitude of the human mind. Thus, Edwards maintains that this process will continue on into eternity since creation will never exhaust the communication of the divine being (*WJE* 8:534). The question of how sin may have affected or impaired this process will have to be the subject of another paper.

<sup>33</sup> *WJE* 2:113

the name of a whole, including the different parts of soul and body.”<sup>34</sup>

But what makes it the case that my soul is united to this particular body? Or stated differently, how is the relationship between my soul and my body any different from its relationship to any other material thing?

This is particularly challenging for Edwards in that he does not think that souls occupy space in the same way as bodies.

And why should we then form such a ridiculous idea of spirits, as to think them so long, so thick, or so wide; or to think there is a necessity of their being square or round or some other certain figure? Therefore spirits cannot be in place in such a sense, that all within the given limits shall be where the spirit is, and all without such a circumscription where he is not.<sup>35</sup>

But that means bodies and souls cannot be related through proximity. My soul is not “in” my body any more than it is “in” my desk. And that means that the body/soul union cannot be established through any kind of identity between the soul and the brain. As Edwards says, “the seat of the soul is not in the brain.”<sup>36</sup>

But if my soul is not in my body, or my brain, any more than it is in my desk, what makes it the case that my body is united to my soul and not the desk? Edwards address this issue through another appeal to phenomenal experience:

all created spirits have clearer and more strongly impressed ideas of things in one place than in another, or can produce effects here and not there; and as this place alters, so spirits move. In spirits united to bodies, the spirit more strongly perceives things where the body is, and can there immediately produce effects, and in this sense the soul can be said to be in the same place where the body is.<sup>37</sup>

In other words, I am united to my body in the sense that the phenomenal experiences produced in me by my body are stronger and more distinct than the phenomenal experiences produced by other bodies. And, since all phenomenal experience is the direct result of God acting moment-by-moment to create bodies that produce phenomenal experiences in conscious beings, the fact that I have clearer and more distinct phenomenal experiences of my body is simply the product of God’s creative activity.

So his first argument for the uniqueness of the body/soul relationship is through

---

<sup>34</sup> *WJE* 3:308

<sup>35</sup> *WJE* 6:338.

<sup>36</sup> *WJE* 6.352. Indeed, it would be incoherent to say that the mind and the brain are identical given Edwards view that “the human body and the brain itself exist only mentally (*WJE* 6.353).

<sup>37</sup> *WJE* 6:338-339. This is what Edwards calls the “law” of the union between soul and body.

phenomenal experience. But Edwards also argues that body and soul are united through a unique “causal” relationship, which takes us to our next point.

### 3. The Mutual Communication between Body and Soul

Edwards also talks about the “mutual communication” between soul and body. And by this he means that body and soul mutually affect one another, but always in such a way that the soul leads and the body follows.

Edwards clearly affirms that changes in the soul effect changes in the body.

And God has so made and established the human nature, the soul being united to a body in proper state, that the soul preferring or choosing such an immediate exertion or alteration of the body, such an alteration instantaneously follows.

Indeed, “so subject is the body to the mind...that there can’t be so much as an intense thought, without an effect” on the body.<sup>38</sup> Clearly there is a strong communication of influence from the soul to the body.<sup>39</sup>

And this is how it should be since God has constituted the body/soul relationship in such a way that the soul is in charge. Only the soul “is properly and directly the subject of precepts or commands.”<sup>40</sup> And only the soul is “the proper seat of affections,” from which flows all human action.<sup>41</sup>

But, despite this strong emphasis on the how the soul affects the body, Edwards also affirms that this truly is a *mutual* communication. So he argues that bodily states can be “an occasion of affections in the mind.”<sup>42</sup> And in his discussions of revivals, Edwards showed remarkable sensitivity to the many ways that bodily states impact the soul.

The restrained language here of the body merely providing an “occasion” for something to happen in the soul raises an important question. What exactly does it mean for soul and body to affect each other? As we discussed earlier, Edwards’ occasionalism means that every moment God creates the universe anew. So it would seem difficult for

---

<sup>38</sup> *WJE* 2:132

<sup>39</sup> Edwards even explains how he thinks the soul effects these changes on the body: through the brain. Although the soul does not reside in the brain, it makes sense to identify the brain as the nexus of the soul’s interactions with the body “because ideas that come by the body immediately ensue only on alterations that are made there, and the soul most immediately produces effects nowhere else” (*WJE* 6:339). More specifically, the soul influences the body by causing the brain to emit “animal spirits,” which go out to the rest of the body and cause the necessary effects (*WJE* 6:246).

<sup>40</sup> *WJE* 302

<sup>41</sup> *WJE* 2:98.

<sup>42</sup> *WJE* 2:269

Edwards to have any concept of creaturely causation.<sup>43</sup> But, if this is the case, how can souls or bodies have any impact on the other?

Consider the problem in this way. If the state of my soul (S1) at one moment (T1) is followed in the next moment (T2) by some state of my body (B2), what is the relationship between S1 and B2? Given Edwards' occasionalism, it seems impossible to say that S1 directly produced B2 since there is nothing of either B or S that endures from T1 to T2. So anything that S1 may or may not have done with respect to B1 can have no direct influence on the state of B2. And, of course, the same logic would hold if we inverted the scenario and tried to understand how the body can have any causal effect on the soul.

But, as I argued above, the solution comes from the idea that creaturely entities "exist" by virtue of a stable idea in the mind of God and his sovereign determination to act according to fixed laws or patterns. At T1, God created S1 with its particular properties. Because God has determined that he will act in consistent (patterned) ways with respect to creation, what he creates at T2, though not directly produced by the state of anything at T1, will be consistent with that state. So, when God creates B2, he does so because it is consistent with the state of S1. In this way, it is even possible to speak of S1 as "causing" B2 if we mean by this that the state of S1 is causally relevant to the production of B2.<sup>44</sup>

#### **4. The Human Person as Communicative Event**

Putting all of the pieces together, we can say that, consistent with his general ontology, Edwards views the human person as a communicative event. In other words, the human person is an event in which God creates the properties of the material world and communicates them to some conscious mind, which he creates in the same moment, so that the material properties are received and known by the conscious mind. Of course, this is true of his ontology as a whole. But, in the body/soul union that constitutes a human person, you have a far more immediate and intimate instantiation of this communicative process. It is most particularly in the human person, then, that God's glory is communicated in creation.

### **Prospects for an Edwardsian Ontology Today**

Since this paper is already long enough, I will not make matters worse by offering

---

<sup>43</sup> Oliver Crisp argues convincingly that Edwards' occasionalism is simply inconsistent with viewing creaturely beings as secondary causes in the traditional sense ("How Occasional Was Edwards' Occasionalism?").

<sup>44</sup> Thus, Edwards prefers to use the language of one creaturely event being the "occasion" for another, rather than serving as "a cause, most properly speaking" (*WJE* 1:181).

an extended conclusion. Nonetheless, I do want to say a few things about possible benefits of Edwards' view of the human person. At the same time, I will note a few areas that need further reflection before an Edwardsian ontology can be appropriated as an adequate interpretation of human being today.

First, although I have some reservations about Sang Hyun Lee's dispositional understanding of Edwards' ontology, I agree with the conclusion that Edwards' anthropological ontology is dynamic and relational in ways that create the possibility for interesting dialog with contemporary science.<sup>45</sup> A world made of quantum fields, subatomic particles, and even vibrating strings is far more fluid, dynamic, and relational than tends to be the case with ontologies based on discrete substances. But all of this would seem quite consistent with Edwards' view of a world that comes to be moment-by-moment through the law-like activity of God.

I also appreciate that Edwards' ontology has a very high view of the material world and, in particular, human bodies. One might expect that an idealistic system like Edwards' would ultimately denigrate the "physical" world. But, as we've seen, the material world is God's own action. Thus, like all of God's actions, it must be a good and valuable thing. And, since it plays an essential role as one moment in the "communicative event," it clearly plays a vital role in Edwards' ontology.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, Edwards' ontology helps illustrate how a panentheistic ontology can ground everything in God's own being while still retaining some distinction between God and creation. Although some have argued that Edwards fails at this very point,<sup>47</sup> Edwards clearly distinguishes between God himself and the properties that he creates in his communicative action. Of course, that does not mean that Edwards' panentheistic approach to the human person is entirely adequate, only that it illustrates one way in which panentheism may provide resources for maintaining a God/creature distinction.

I am sure that plenty could be said here about potential weaknesses in Edwards' anthropological ontology. Let me highlight just a few.

My single biggest frustration with Edwards' approach is the almost total lack of engagement with the person and work of Christ.<sup>48</sup> For someone with such a high

---

<sup>45</sup> See esp. *The Philosophy of Jonathan Edwards*, 76-114. Some scholars have specifically appropriate Lee's insight into their own anthropological projects (e.g. Mark Graves, *Mind, Brain, and the Elusive Soul: Human Systems of Cognitive Science and Religion* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 189-190, and F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 34).

<sup>46</sup> For more on this, see esp. Sang Hyun Lee, "Jonathan Edwards on Nature," in *Faithful Imagining: Essays in Honor of Richard R Niebuhr*, edited by Wayne L. Proudfoot, Albert L. Blackwell, and Sang Huyn Lee (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995).

<sup>47</sup> e.g. Clyde A. Holbrooke, *Jonathan Edwards, The Valley and Nature: An Interpretive Essay* (Bucknell University Press, 1987).

<sup>48</sup> This is particular surprising since Edwards' theology has a perfect starting point for such an approach. Edwards affirms that the Son is the only perfect expression of the Father's self-knowledge. As such, the

appreciation for the incarnation, it is startling how little this factored into his view of human ontology. I have yet to find any place in Edwards' writings where he uses the incarnation as a starting point for reflecting on human ontology. Indeed, I have yet to even find him reflecting on the implications of his anthropological ontology for understanding the incarnation. If we view the body and human soul of Christ through the lens of Edwards' event-ontology, do we end up with an adequate view of the incarnation? That is a difficult question to answer at this point since Edwards does not seem to have addressed it himself.<sup>49</sup>

Second, although I earlier expressed appreciation for Edwards' high view of creaturely reality and the human body, there are still some concerns regarding his view of the created order. Most importantly, when Edwards discusses human persons living a disembodied existence in heaven, he describes them as living a complete human existence with the full range of affections and as continuing in their purpose as conscious knowers of God's glory.<sup>50</sup> But that suggests that human bodies really are not essential for full human existence and for carrying out God's purposes. If so, then it would seem that Edwards' ontology, at that point at least, is inadequate given the narrative of redemption and its emphasis on creation, incarnation, and resurrection, all of which are inherently embodied realities.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, I still have some questions about whether Edwards' approach provides adequate ground for personal identity through time. His occasionalism renders it impossible to ground personal identity in any kind of creaturely continuity. So his solution is to argue that God can treat discrete entities as comprising a single whole and that this is adequate for grounding the identity of creaturely beings.<sup>52</sup> Thus, personal identity seems to be grounded in the divine will alone, which raises questions for, among other things, moral responsibility. We can strengthen this account of personal responsibility somewhat by pointing out that God has determined to act in law-like ways with respect to creation. So my identity is continuous with the "me" who existed a moment ago because God has decreed that he will create each successive version of "me" in ways that are consistent with each prior version. So there is continuity in that each

---

Son is the perfect *idea* in whom all created ideas find their being. Note that this sounds very much like Maximus' logos theology.

<sup>49</sup> I acknowledge, though, that given the breadth and diversity of Edwards' writings, it is entirely possible that Edwards has addressed these issues somewhere.

<sup>50</sup> See *WJE* 2:113

<sup>51</sup> I also wonder if Edwards' language of bodies being "lower" and "less substantial" than souls doesn't suggest an implicit denigration of creaturely realities even though that is not his intent in these passages.

<sup>52</sup> See *WJE* 3:397-402; see also Paul Helm, "A Forensic Dilemma: John Locke and Jonathan Edwards on Personal Identity," in *Jonathan Edwards: Philosophical Theologian*, edited by Paul Helm and Oliver Crisp, 45-59 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004) and Oliver Crisp, *Jonathan Edwards And The Metaphysics Of Sin* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), chapter 5.

state of “me” bears a particular relation to each prior state that is true of no other entity. So personal identity is not entirely arbitrary, but it is still not grounded in anything that persists from one moment to the next. I’m unsure, though, whether even this stronger form of Edwardsian identity is adequate.<sup>53</sup>

To conclude, Edwards offers a fascinating and all-encompassing view of the universe in general and the mind/body relationship in particular. If nothing else, his ontology offers a refreshingly different perspective that is deeply theological while still being sensitive to the insights and contributions of philosophy and the sciences. Regardless of whether modern thinkers are willing to embrace such a radically idealistic understanding of the universe, his approach is worth studying further.

---

<sup>53</sup> Interestingly, though, this approach to personal identity would have a much easier time accounting for continuous identity through death and resurrection. As long as any post-resurrection form of “me” was created as a consistent expression of the pre-resurrection state of “me,” we could affirm that it is the same “me.”