

**The Narcissistic God of Jonathan Edwards:**  
**A Theological and Biblical Commentary on Selected Portions of**  
**Edwards's Seminal Essays**

**“Concerning the End for Which God Created the World” (c. 1755)**

**and**

**“The Nature of True Virtue” (c. 1755)**

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## Introduction

In my book *The End of the Unrepentant: A Study of the Biblical Themes of Fire and Being Consumed* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013), I put forth a bold claim:

If you start from the idea—founded on a superficial reading of a tiny sliver of the witness of Scripture—that God is the sort of deity who is glorified by tormenting his creatures forever, then you can certainly build a theology on that foundation. Your theology will be one whose first principle is that of *control*. It will be a theology of God as the imperious master, whose greatest concern is to retain complete domination.

...

In this system, God is characterized as though he is the Great Narcissist, who makes creatures in his own image so that they can adore him. He loves them not for their own sake, but for the sake of what they can give him. The love of a deity whose greatest concerns are adulation from and control over his creatures offers no example for loving your neighbor as yourself.<sup>1</sup>

It is by no means obvious that everyone who believes in everlasting torment consistently embraces such a noxious view of God. But then again, people are very often less than fully consistent in their theology. What we need to look for, in order to put this assertion to the test, is a theologian who enthusiastically embraces the idea of everlasting torment on the one hand, and who also fearlessly, systematically, and intelligently develops a theology of the deepest nature and purposes of God on the other hand. The famous 18<sup>th</sup> century American theologian Jonathan Edwards fits the profile perfectly. He is universally recognized as a great thinker and theologian, and he is unabashedly admired by those who embrace the biblical doctrine of everlasting torment. In fact, his sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (1741), is indisputably the most famous “hellfire and damnation” sermon ever preached. Happily for our purpose, Edwards (hereafter JE) in his more mature years wrote two detailed and radical dissertations which, between them, put our claim to the test in a way that is amply clear and revealing. I will be commenting on those portions that are the clearest and the most germane to the advancement of his central theses.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See “The Theology of Total Domination and Infinite Vindictiveness,” in Chapter 8: The End of the Unrepentant: Hermeneutical and Theological Conclusion.

<sup>2</sup> Those who wish to put the selected extracts into their complete context can read both essays in their entirety online at <http://edwards.yale.edu/>. The best hard-copy edition is “Concerning the End” and “The Nature of True Virtue,” in *Works of Jonathan Edwards. 8. Ethical Writings* (ed. Paul Ramsey; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989).

## Part 1.

### Commentary on “Concerning the End for Which God Created the World” (c. 1755)

My method below is to present a good-sized extract and then make comments on it. The force of Edwards's argument is cumulative, and so is the force of my critique. If it seems at any point that I am over-characterizing what he says, put a bookmark at that place and come back to it when you've read his entire argument. You may discover that something that you thought could not possibly be his intended meaning was exactly what he had been saying after all. Let's begin.

#### Chapter I. Wherein Is Considered, What Reason Teaches Concerning This Affair

[N]o notion of God's last end in the creation of the world, is agreeable to reason, which would truly imply any indigence, insufficiency, and mutability in God; or any dependence of the Creator on the creature, for any part of his perfection or happiness. Because it is evident, by both Scripture and reason, that God is infinitely, eternally, unchangeably, and independently glorious and happy: that he cannot be profited by, or receive anything from, the creature; or be the subject of any sufferings, or diminution of his glory and felicity, from any other being. (Chapter I Section I)

Note the non-biblical (Greek, Platonic) thinking here. The God of the Bible is definitely capable of feeling grief and having unfulfilled desires (e.g. Gen. 6:5-6; 1Tim. 2:1-4).

That if God himself be, in any respect, properly capable of being his own end in the creation of the world, then it is reasonable to suppose that he had respect to himself, as his last and highest end, in this work; because he is worthy in himself to be so, being infinitely the greatest and best of beings. All things else, with regard to worthiness, importance, and excellence, are perfectly as nothing in comparison of him. And therefore, if God has respect to things according to their nature and proportions, he must necessarily have the greatest respect to himself. (Chapter I Section I)

“As nothing”? How does this track with the biblical revelation that God created us as his *own sons and daughters*, and with the fact that his own Son considered it worth giving up his very life for the life of this world? The concept of the creation and salvation of the children of God, and the concept of the death of Jesus Christ as a self-sacrifice for us, are perhaps the two deepest biblical and Christian concepts. From a Platonic point of view we human beings might well be worth less than dust in relation to God, but biblical revelation tells us an entirely opposite story. In Jn 17:22-23, for example, Jesus prays, “The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”

JE seems to be working on the mediaeval and scholastic assumption that the greater status a being has, the more entitled that being is to be self-centered in its motivations. The conclusion from this assumption is that since God has infinite status, God is entitled to be completely self-centered. How on earth is this biblical? Granted that the Creator of the universe is *entitled* to be self-centered if he wishes, God as revealed to us in Jesus Christ insists that he does not operate that way. Jesus keeps trying to reverse his disciples' ideas about this: “For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table?

But I am among you as the one who serves" (Lk. 22:27; see also Jn 13:1-17). Selfless giving and service are being recommended to us because we are called as children to learn to be motivated like our Father God and his Son Jesus Christ.

Hence it will follow, that the moral rectitude of the disposition, inclination, or affection of God Chiefly consists in a regard to Himself, infinitely above his regard to all other beings; or, in other words, his holiness consists in this. (Chapter I Section I)

JE thinks that God's "moral rectitude," i.e. God's right ethical motivation and action, consists in considering his own interests infinitely above the interests of creation. However possible or even reasonable that may sound in the abstract, it is *not biblical*.

Thus, we must conclude, that such an arbiter as I have supposed, would determine, that the whole universe, in all its actings, proceedings, revolution, and entire series of events, should proceed with a view to God, as the supreme and last end; that every wheel, in all its rotations, should move with a constant invariable regard to him as the ultimate end of all; as perfectly and uniformly, as if the whole system were animated and directed by one common soul. (Chapter I Section I)

This is confused and confusing. It is right and proper for us, as beings brought into existence through the generous creative activity of God, to devote ourselves to pleasing him and doing his will. But his will is that we love one another and serve the whole living creation (e.g. Jn 13:34; Gen. 1:28). It is misleading to say that everything in creation should "proceed with a view to" and "move with a constant invariable regard to" God. JE makes it sound as though 100% of our attention should ideally be directed towards God. But God did not create the universe to revolve exclusively around him. God draws us into his work of serving the creation, so that a significant amount of our attention, properly aligned with God's, becomes directed not "upward," but "outward"—to the love and care of our fellow created beings. Our love for our fellow creatures is not a slight to God, but an agreement with God and a glorification of God, who also loves them.

If the perfection itself be excellent, the knowledge of it is excellent, and so is the esteem and love of it excellent. And as it is fit that God should love and esteem his own excellence, it is also fit that he should value and esteem the love of his excellency. And if it becomes a being highly to value himself, it is fit that he should love to have himself valued and esteemed. (Chapter I Section II Point 3)

JE is saying that God justly regards himself as excellent and loveable, so he is entitled to love, i.e. to be motivated to bring about, recognition of his loveable and excellent nature on the part of other beings. We'll want to see if JE is going to go on from this presupposition to conclude that God's highest, or, in his terms, "supreme" or "chief" motivation for bringing human beings into existence is for the purpose of having them love, esteem, and adulate him. If that turns out to be his thinking, then he does not believe that God loves us for our own sake, but only for what we can give him. Similarly, we will not be entitled to love and desire the well-being of any other created being for their own sake, but only to the extent that this fulfills the purpose of recruiting them into the universal adulation of God.

In the last section I observed some things which are actually the consequence of the creation of the world, which seem absolutely valuable in themselves, and so worthy to be made God's last end in his work. I now proceed to inquire, how God's making such things as these his last end, is consistent with his making himself his last end, or his manifesting an ultimate respect

to himself in his acts and works. Because it is agreeable to the dictates of reason, that in all his proceedings he should set himself highest; therefore, I would endeavor to show, how his infinite love to and delight in himself, will naturally cause him to value and delight in these things: or rather, how a value to these things is implied in his value of that infinite fullness of good that is in himself. (Chapter I Section III)

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He that loves anything, naturally loves the approbation of that thing, and is opposite to the disapprobation of it. Thus it is when one loves the virtues of a friend. And thus it will necessarily be, if a being loves himself and highly prizes his own excellencies; and thus it is fit it should be, if it be fit he should thus love himself, and prize his own valuable qualities; that is, it is fit that he should take delight in his own excellencies being seen, acknowledged, esteemed, and delighted in. This is implied in a love to himself and his own perfections; and in making this his end, he makes himself his end. (Chapter I Section III)

Yes, God loves the creation, says JE. But that is okay, because it doesn't force us to conclude that he loves us for our own sake. No, the real reason why God creates the creation and loves the creation (and us in particular) is that this provides more beings to agree with God's high opinion of himself. So God can't be accused of having a motive that is not in the final analysis purely self-centered.

Chapter I Section IV. Some objections considered, which may be made against the reasonableness of what has been said of God making himself his last end.

Object[ion]. I. Some may object against what has been said as being inconsistent with God's absolute independence and immutability: particularly, as though God were inclined to a communication of his fullness, and emanations of his own glory, as being his own most glorious and complete state.

Ans[wer]. 1. ...If he did not take pleasure in the expression of his own beauty, it would rather be an evidence that he does not delight in his own beauty; that he has not his happiness and enjoyment in his own beauty and perfection. So that if we suppose God has real pleasure and happiness in the holy love and praise of his saints, as the image and communication of his own holiness, it is not properly any pleasure distinct from the pleasure he has in himself; but it is truly an instance of it. (Chapter I Section IV)

When we created beings love and esteem and take joy in God, that doesn't make God passable and mutable (i.e. subject to change) or dependent on us, because all that is going on is that God is loving and esteeming and taking joy in himself by means of us.

Object[ion]. II. Some may object, that to suppose God makes himself his highest and last end, is dishonorable to him; as it in effect supposes, that God does every thing from a selfish spirit.

Ans[wer]. 1. Such an objection must arise from a very ignorant or inconsiderate notion of the vice of selfishness, and the virtue of generosity.

But if God be indeed so great, and so excellent, that all other beings are as nothing to him, and all other excellency be as nothing, and less than nothing and vanity, in comparison of his; and God be omniscient and infallible, and perfectly knows that he is infinitely the most valuable being; then it is fit that his heart should be agreeable to this — which is indeed the true nature and proportion of things, and agreeable to this infallible and all-comprehending understanding which he has of them, and that perfectly clear light in which he views them — and that he should value himself infinitely more than his creatures. (Chapter I Section IV)

As disgusting as this line of reasoning is, I suppose that one could, on a purely philosophical basis, posit such a deity. But Christians aren't called to dream up a deity based on philosophy; we are called to believe the testimony of Jesus Christ and his apostles and prophets. Jesus says that the divine self-love between the Father and the Son is *the same love* with which they regard us, God's children. The unique and startling revelation of God through Jesus is that we are loved just as God the Father loves God the Son (Jn 17:22-23). It's true that Isa. 40:12-17 talks about God regarding the nations as "dust on the scales" and "less than nothing." But Isaiah is referring to the nations that insist on living as idolaters, worshiping the idols made by their own hands. He is prophesying that they have no power—less than no power—to stand in the way of God's powerful creative and saving work on behalf of the redeemed. It is an extremely hazardous theological move to extrapolate from this kind of poetic statement to the conclusion that God's attitude towards those whom he names *children* is that they are "nothing to him."

Object[ion]. III. To what has been supposed, that God makes himself his end — in seeking that his glory and excellent perfections should be known, esteemed, loved, and delighted in by his creatures — it may be objected, that this seems unworthy of God.

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2. I would observe, that it is not unworthy of God to take pleasure in that which is in itself fit and amiable, even in those that are infinitely below him.

They who insist, that God's own glory was not an ultimate end of his creation of the world; but the happiness of his creatures; do it under a color of exalting God's benevolence to his creatures. But if his love to them be so great, and he so highly values them as to look upon them worthy to be his end in all his great works, as they suppose; they are not consistent with themselves, in supposing that God has so little value for their love and esteem. For as the nature of love, especially great love, causes him that loves to value the esteem of the person beloved; so, that God should take pleasure in the creature's just love and esteem, will follow from God's love both to himself and to his creatures. If he esteem and love himself, he must approve of esteem and love to himself, and disapprove the contrary. And if he loves and values the creature, he must value and take delight in their mutual love and esteem. (Chapter I Section IV)

JE has made two fundamental errors here. First, he has pretended that the objection was to God having any appreciation for the love of his children. But that is not the objection—rather, the objection is to the notion that the central, ultimate, and supreme end (i.e. purpose and goal) of all God's creative activity is so that the creature will join him in loving and esteeming himself. Secondly, JE has confused agape love with romantic or affinity-based love. Agape love has nothing to do with wanting someone else to reflect back to you how loveable you are. It is about desiring their well-being, *completely independent* of whether that results in their having some instrumental usefulness to you or some way of giving benefit back to you. Jesus teaches us that agape love is the most fundamental love of God, which we, who aspire to grow up as God's children, are commanded to emulate.

Object[ion]. IV. To suppose that God makes himself his ultimate end in the creation of the world, derogates from [i.e. detracts from or insults] the freeness of his goodness, in his beneficence to his creatures; and from their obligations to gratitude for the good communicated. For if God, in communicating his fullness, makes himself, and not the

creatures, his end; then what good he does, he does for himself, and not for them; for his sake, and not theirs.

Answer. God and the creature, in the emanation of the divine fullness, are not properly set in opposition; or made the opposite parts of a disjunction.

God in seeking his glory, seeks the good of his creatures; because the emanation of his glory (which he seeks and delights in, as he delights in himself and his own eternal glory) implies the communicated excellency and happiness of his creatures. And in communicating his fullness for them, he does it for himself; because their good, which he seeks, is so much in union and communion with himself. God is their good. Their excellency and happiness is nothing, but the emanation and expression of God's glory: God, in seeking their glory and happiness, seeks himself: and in seeking himself, i.e. himself diffused and expressed (which he delights in, as he delights in his own beauty and fullness), he seeks their glory and happiness. (Chapter I Section IV)

JE seems to be saying that statements A. and B. below are ultimately saying the same thing:

A. This is the way in which God loved the world: he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him would not perish but have eternal life (Jn 3:16).

B. This is the way in which God loved the world: he so loved expressing himself and the idea of being loved, that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him would express his infinite self-love back to him for all eternity.

Forget all of this dense philosophy business for a minute. Did Jesus die for us because he loved us—*independent* of his own personal wellbeing—so much that he was willing to lay down his life for our salvation? Is it true that Jesus expresses the love of the Father for us when he acts on our behalf in self-giving and self-sacrificial love? Or was his whole life and death simply an investment that he and God the Father made in the process of planting and harvesting adulation from the creation?

## **Chapter II Wherein If It Is Inquired, What Is To Be Learned From Holy Scriptures, Concerning God's Last End In The Creation Of The World**

Section I The Scriptures represent God as making himself his own last end in the creation of the world

Heb. 2:10, “For it became him, by whom are all things, and for whom are all things.” And in Pro. 16:4, it is said expressly, “The Lord hath made all things for himself.”

And the manner is observable, in which God is said to be the last, to whom, and for whom, are all things. It is evidently spoken of as a meet and suitable thing, a branch of his glory; a meet prerogative of the great, infinite, and eternal Being; a thing becoming the dignity of him who is infinitely above all other beings; from whom all things are, and by whom they consist; and in comparison with whom all other things are as nothing. (Chapter II Section I)

JE doesn't realize that when Scripture says that God made the world for himself and for his glory, that *raises*, rather than *answers*, the question of what God's purposes were in creating the world. The world is here (and we are here) because it pleased God to create the world, for his own purpose and pleasure. *What is God's purpose and pleasure?* It is to bring into existence a whole, beautiful, “very good” (Gen. 1:31) economy of interdependent life, and to bring his own children into existence and then do whatever it takes to give them everlasting life within that living economy (Rom. 8:18-23). When God puts a value on something, *that is its value*. Given

that Jesus Christ has revealed God's valuation of us as beloved children, it is not an insult to us, but to God, for JE to keep repeating the idea that "in comparison with [God] all other things are as nothing." Yes, I might have thought that about myself too, but God himself keeps insisting that I am highly valuable. My job is to humble myself and work on accepting the surprising testimony of God, rather than going with my prejudices or the speculations of abstract human philosophy on this one.

CHAPTER II Section II Wherein some positions are advanced concerning a just method of arguing in this affair, from what we find in the Holy Scriptures

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Position 4. That which appears, from the Word of God, to be his ultimate end with respect to the moral world, or the intelligent part of the system, that is God's last end in the work of creation in general. Because it is evident, from the constitution of the world itself, as well as from the Word of God, that the moral part is the end of all the rest of the creation. The inanimate, unintelligent part, is made for the rational, as much as a house is prepared for the inhabitant.

JE's strict anthropocentrism is not, so far as I know, justified by any teaching in Scripture. The scriptures tell us why we were created, and they tell us that we have the duty and the potential ability to exercise a delegated management role in relation to the living systems of the earth. What they do not tell us is that everything that is not "moral" and "intelligent," and "rational" in creation (in the same sense that we are) has been brought into existence for the sole purpose of making a "house" for those beings that are "moral," "intelligent," and "rational." I gratefully acknowledge that the earth is our habitation, and I look on it as a precious gift of God to us that we are allowed to live here. But that does not imply that God has made this earth, let alone the ten or twenty trillion known stars in the visible universe, with all their planets, for no other purpose than that of housing our species. Perhaps God finds joy in creating and nurturing other kinds of being than those that happen to share the particular style of sentience that we experience.

Please allow me to put forward an ultra-simple analogy. Suppose I have three children, and I also own a dog. I know very well that my dog has a different, and in many respects weaker, form of intelligence than that of my children. Nonetheless, I love my dog and my dog loves me. My dog is morally innocent and uncomplicated. That is not a defect, however, but simply something that distinguishes my dog as a particular and unique being. I like dogs, and I acquired this dog for its own sake, and not simply for the sake of the children. The dog has its own winning personality, which pleases me quite apart from the fact that it also pleases my children. My point in this analogy is that it takes nothing from the dignity, worth, and love in which I hold my children that I also love something other than them. It is, in fact, only immature children who cannot imagine a world in which everything does not revolve around them. What JE puts forward as advanced theological thinking, may well be seen instead as standard Enlightenment-era anthropocentrism projected onto God. After all, there is not one word, not one scrap, in Scripture that tells us that everything other than humanity has been created for the sake of humanity and for no other purpose.

Chapter II Section III Particular texts of Scripture, that show that God's glory is an ultimate end of the creation

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3. The Scripture speaks of God's glory, as his ultimate end of the goodness of the moral part of the creation; and that end, in relation to which chiefly the value of their virtue consists.

As in Phil. 1:10, 11, "That ye may approve things that are excellent, that ye may be sincere, and without offense, till the day of Christ: being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God." Here the apostle shows how the fruits of righteousness in them are valuable, and how they answer their end, viz. In being "by Jesus Christ to the praise and glory of God." John 15:8, "Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit." Signifying, that by this means it is that the great end of religion is to be answered.

I agree that increasing the glory of God is an excellent, and even eternal, human motivation. But when I love my neighbor as myself, and treat him or her with kindness and respect, I do not do it for the exclusive, or even primary, conscious purpose of bringing God glory. I love my neighbor because God has set a high value on the life and dignity and well-being of my neighbor, and I am learning to join God my Father in loving and esteeming my neighbor. God gets glory when I, a young but maturing child of God, learn to love as God loves. How does this accrual of glory to God occur? It occurs because whenever God brings into existence a being with the potential to join God in loving the creation, and that being shows forth love in the creation, God's love is manifested in the creation through that being, and God's loving character is mirrored in the creation through that being. As Jesus says, "Let your light shine in front of people, so that they see the good things you do and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Mt. 5:16). In such an instance, what has happened is that the observer has realized something about God's love and kindness, thanks to my action as a created being. I have glorified God.

4. There are some things in the Word of God which lead us to suppose, that it requires of men that they should desire and seek God's glory, as their highest and last end in what they do.

As particularly, from 1 Cor. 10:31, "Whether therefore ye eat or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God." And 1 Pet. 4:11, — "That God in all things may be glorified."

...

6. The Scripture leads us to suppose, that Christ sought God's glory, as his highest and last end. (Chapter II Section III)

Further to my comment above on JE's Point 3, "Do all for the glory of God" is a kind of shorthand for striving in all circumstances and in all activities to imitate God and to model, for your fellow created beings, the goodness of God (Mt. 5:48; Eph. 5:1; 1 Pet. 1:15-16; 2:12).

Chapter II Section V Places of Scripture from whence it may be argued, that communication of good to the creature, was one thing which God had in view, as an ultimate end of the creation of the world.

1. According to the Scripture, communicating good to the creatures is what is in itself pleasing to God.

And this is not merely subordinately agreeable, and esteemed valuable on account of its relation to a further end, as it is in executing justice in punishing the sins of men; but what God is inclined to on its own account, and what he delights in simply and ultimately.

This section (Chapter II Section V) could appear directly to contradict the way I have been reading JE so far, but the contradiction goes away when we recall that in 18<sup>th</sup> century English, the verb "communicate" means to "impart" or "share," not to "express." Thus, JE is not saying

that, for God, *doing good* to human beings is an ultimate purpose distinct from glorifying himself. He's saying that *imparting* good to human beings is one of his ultimate purposes. Which is to say, one of God's ultimate purposes is that of *making human beings good*. We will find out later what JE's definition of "good" is, and that will resolve the contradiction.

2. The work of redemption wrought out by Jesus Christ, is spoken of in such a manner as, being from the grace and love of God to men, does not well consist with his seeking a communication of good to them, only subordinately.

Such expressions as that in John 3:16, carry another idea. "God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him, should not perish, but have everlasting life." And 1 John 4:9, 10, "In this was manifested the love of God towards us, because that God sent his only-begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love; not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." So Eph. 2:4, "But God who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us," etc. But if indeed this was only from a regard to a further end, entirely diverse from our good; then all the love is truly terminated in that, its ultimate object, and therein is his love manifested, strictly and properly speaking, and not in that he loved us, or exercised such high regard towards us. For if our good be not at all regarded ultimately, but only subordinately, then our good or interest is, in itself considered, nothing in God's regard.

The Scripture everywhere represents it, as though the great things Christ did and suffered, were in the most direct and proper sense from exceeding love to us. Thus the apostle Paul represents the matter, Gal. 2:20, "Who loved me, and gave himself for me." Eph. 5:25, "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church, and gave himself for it."

I totally agree with JE here. If God's desire for our good were a subordinate end, then he wouldn't really love us for our own sake. It is interesting that he has been hammering for the entire dissertation on the idea that God's glory is his one supreme and ultimate end. But now it appears that God has a separate, independent end, which is his love for us. We'll have to see if he holds onto this idea, and if he is able to make sense of its relationship to God's glory as an ultimate end.

6. God's judgments on the wicked in this world, and also their eternal damnation in the world to come, are spoken of, as being for the happiness of God's people.

Obviously "God's judgments on the wicked," which take place when God removes from them the power to harm their fellow human beings, are for the happiness of those who are being made miserable by the oppression and violence of the wicked. But the second claim of this statement—that the Bible teaches that the *everlasting torment* of the wicked is "for the happiness of God's people"—is false, and even pernicious. What kind of monster is going to be made happier by the notion that God is going to torment their former oppressors infinitely and without end? As a person whose conscience has been formed by Jesus' command that I love my enemies and pray for my persecutors (Mt. 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-28, 34-35; cf. Acts 7:60), I would be entirely satisfied if God would do three things in relation to those who have previously harmed me and my loved ones, and have gone to their graves stubbornly unrepentant: (1) publicly convict them of what they have done, and make them face the pain it has caused us; (2) make them aware in some way of how he (God) has made it up to us, and (3) give them an opportunity to repent before destroying them. (1) is not even for the sake of revenge, but to make (3) possible. (2) is the sweetest revenge, if it can be called that, since anyone who truly wished to harm us would be forced to realize that, in the long run, they had

never possessed any power to harm us. They will be made to know that our God has already wiped away every tear from our eyes, and the former sorrows are forgotten forever (Isa. 25:8; 65:17-19; Jer. 31:13; Rev. 7:17; 21:4). Given that many of my most painful “former sorrows” had to do with the self-inflicted misery of those whom I loved dearly but who remained steadfastly unrepentant, how is it supposed to make me happy to have this misery amplified a thousandfold and perpetuated for all eternity?

7. It seems to argue, that God’s goodness to them who are to be the eternal subjects of his goodness, is the end of the creation; since the whole creation, in all its parts, is spoken of as theirs.

1 Cor. 3:21-23, “All things are yours, whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come, all are yours.” The terms are very universal; and both works of creation and providence are mentioned; and it is manifestly the design of the apostle to be understood of every work of God whatsoever. Now, how can we understand this any otherwise, than that all things are for their benefit; and that God made and uses all for their good?

This is far too radical a position for JE to hang upon one rather poetic statement by Paul. After all, if we take Paul as literally as JE wants to, everything was not created simply for the holy ones in general, but for the Corinthians in particular—and that is obviously false. But let’s just consider the question of whether the entire created world has been brought into being exclusively for the sake of human beings. Did God, for example, create all the angelic beings, whom he names in many places “the sons of God” or “the children of God” (Gen. 6:2-4; Job 1:7; 2:1; 38:7; Ps. 82:1-6; Dan. 3:25; Jn 10:35) for the one and only purpose of functioning as servants of human beings? Are they really just some kind of step-children in relation to us? Such a conclusion is simply not warranted by the Bible or any passage in the Bible. The only thing that drives that conclusion is the childish conviction that we human beings must be the center of the universe and of reality itself. This conviction is known as *anthropocentrism*, and there is no real theological, biblical, philosophical, or scientific rationale for it. To pop the entire soap bubble of it, one need only ponder one simple question: “What does it cost us, if God should also love other created beings besides ourselves?”

9. That expression in the blessed sentence pronounced on the righteous at the day of judgment, “Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world,” seems to hold forth thus much, that the fruits of God’s goodness to them, was his end in creating the world, and in his providential disposals: that God in all his works, in laying the foundation of the world, and ever since the foundation of it, had been preparing this kingdom and glory for them.

Common as it may be, the fact remains that this is an exceedingly inattentive and immature reading of this text. It is not the subjects of a kingdom that “inherit” the kingdom, but the princes and princesses of a kingdom—i.e. the offspring of the monarch. They inherit the rulership of the kingdom from the reigning king or queen—when he or she feels they are mature enough to handle the enormous responsibility of governorship. Clearly, it was God’s plan, from before creation ever was, to put the government of the living earth under the charge of human beings as a species. This plan is explicitly stated at the creation of human beings (Gen. 1:26), and it is stated to human beings when they are created (Gen. 1:28). Ever since the original human beings ruptured the relationship between themselves and their Creator, God has been in a process of recalling human beings from a state of dissipation,

violence, and destructiveness within the creation that they were to have been managing and nurturing. But when God's current work through Christ is finished in us, this responsibility will be put back into our hands, and the forces of mortality and frustration will no longer be forced to work against us in order to protect the creation from us (Rom. 8:18-25; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 5:10; 22:1-5). It is an out-and-out mistake to conclude, from the fact that we have been given the responsibility to serve the creation by managing it, that the creation has no value and dignity independent of ourselves. One of Jesus' most oft-repeated themes is the idea that a person with authority *does not* achieve their dignity and worth by having more dignity and worth than those for whom they have responsibility (Mt. 20:25-28; 23:8-12; Lk. 9:48; 22:25-27; Jn 13:14-15).

2. The word glory is used in Scripture often to express the exhibition, emanation, or communication of the internal glory.

What we find in John 12:23-32 is worthy of particular notice in this place. The words and behavior of Christ, of which we have here an account, argue two things.

(1.) That the happiness and salvation of men, was an end that Christ ultimately aimed at in his labors and sufferings.

(2.) The glory of God, and the emanations and fruits of this grace in man's salvation, are so spoken of by Christ on this occasion in just the same manner, that it would be quite unnatural to understand him as speaking of two distinct things.

Such is the connection, that what he says of the latter, must most naturally be understood as exegetical of the former. He first speaks of his own glory, and the glory of his Father, as the great end that should be obtained by what he was about to suffer; and then explains and amplifies this, in what he expresses of the salvation of men that shall be obtained by it. (Chapter II Section VI Point I.2)

In the Gospel of John, the noun “glory” (Gr. *doxa*) and the related verb “glorify” (Gr. *doxazō*) carry a distinctive and specific connotation. In John, glory is *the public manifestation of God's (or Christ's) true nature and character*.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, when Jesus glorifies God, he publicly reveals the nature and character of God to the world. Similarly, when God glorifies Jesus, he publicly reveals Jesus' true nature and character to the world. This means that God's glory or God's self-glorification on the one hand, and God's saving work through Jesus on the other hand, *are not* to be understood as one and the same. God's and Christ's self-giving and even self-sacrificial love as expressed in the ministry and death of Jesus *shows us what God is truly like*. His love expressed in our salvation publicly reveals the fact that he is a God who loves his children and is willing to do anything it takes to reconcile them to himself and save them from harm and death.

In radical distinction from this, JE (as we will see in detail below) is going to define glory as God's drive to provide extra participants to join in the self-love that God enjoys between the Father and the Son. That is to say, the entire purpose of God's bringing of creation into existence is so that God could make and save human beings. And the entire process of creating and saving human beings will be for the single purpose of achieving God's desire to multiply the mutual love and enjoyment that the Father and the Son share.<sup>4</sup> This is why JE is prepared

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<sup>3</sup> Jn 1:14; 2:11; 7:18; 8:50; 11:4, 40; 12:16, 23-28, 41; 13:31-32; 14:13; 15:8; 16:14; 17:1-5, 10, 22, 24; 21:19.

<sup>4</sup> JE claims elsewhere that the Holy Spirit, although he is a truly personal being, is also, in the most literal sense possible, the love between the Father and the Son. According to this train of logic, the infilling of the Holy Spirit

to say that God's salvation of human beings is no more or less, in the final analysis, than the process of God glorifying himself. For JE, God *does not* glorify himself through our salvation in the sense of manifesting his character as a being who loves his children for their own sake. No, God glorifies himself through our salvation precisely and solely in the sense that he brings about, through our salvation, the effective achievement of his desire to multiply the love and adoration that he has for himself.<sup>5</sup> If this sounds slanderous, read on.

3. Again, the word glory, as applied to God in Scripture, implies the view or knowledge of God's excellency.

And it is manifest in many places, where we read of God glorifying himself, or of his being glorified, that one thing, directly intended, is making known his divine greatness and excellency.

This kind of statement ends up having two totally different polarities, depending on where you go with it. To put it simply, God's glorification of himself can be seen as either (1) God revealing openly in the world his generous, compassionate, even self-sacrificial love for his created beings, or (2) the expression of God's desire to have others besides (the triune community of) himself recognize and celebrate how great and excellent and worthy of praise he is.

Chapter II, Section 7. SHEWING, THAT THE ULTIMATE END OF THE CREATION OF THE WORLD IS BUT ONE, AND WHAT THAT ONE END IS.

From what has been observed in the last section, it appears, if the whole of what is said relating to this affair be duly weighed, and one part compared with another, we shall have reason to think that the design of the Spirit of God is not to represent God's ultimate end as manifold, but as ONE.

JE has now finished laying the conceptual and (biblical) hermeneutical foundation upon which he can build a full explication of his radical theological conclusions. Yes, he has said above, the salvation of human beings is spoken of in Scripture as *an* ultimate end, and so it clearly is. Our salvation is not in service of any other end. But God's glory has also been spoken of as *the* ultimate end of God's work and all God's works. In some way, therefore, these two ultimate ends must be resolvable to one.

For though it be signified by various names, yet they appear not to be names of different things, but various names involving each other in their meaning; either different names of the same thing, or names of several parts of one whole; or of the same whole viewed in various lights, or in its different respects and relations. For it appears, that all that is ever spoken of in the scripture as an ultimate end of God's works, is included in that one phrase, the glory of [p. 234] God; which is the name by which the ultimate end of God's works is most commonly called in scripture; and seems most aptly to signify the thing.

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in the redeemed is precisely and specifically defined as love for God that is imparted so that we can participate in the love that God has for himself (see *Standing in Grace: A Treatise on Grace*, by Jonathan Edwards [ed. Don Kistler; Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2002], Chapter 3, esp. pp. 43-56).

<sup>5</sup> Of the love that is in heaven, JE says this: "It is altogether holy and divine...the love which has place there is not carnal, but spiritual; not proceeding from corrupt principles, not from selfish motives, and to mean and vile purposes; but there love is a pure flame. The saints there love God for his own sake, and each other for God's sake, for the sake of that relation which they bear to God, and that image of God which is upon them" ("Sermon 15: Heaven is a World of Love" (1749), in *WJE* 8 (ed. Paul Ramsey; New Haven: Yale University Press,

God's ultimate aim and intention, through creation (his "works") is to glorify himself. JE is now going to finish unpacking what he thinks that means.

The thing signified by that name, the glory of God, when spoken of as the supreme and ultimate end of all God's works, is the emanation and true external expression of God's internal glory and fulness; meaning by his fulness, what has already been explained; or, in other words, God's internal glory, in a true and just exhibition, or external existence of it.

God's fulness can be characterized as the outward-expanding impetus of God's native, in-and-of-himself glory. It's a kind of natural drive or desire to express himself.

It is confessed, that there is a degree of obscurity in these definitions; but perhaps an obscurity which is unavoidable, through the imperfection of language to express things of so sublime a nature. And therefore the thing may possibly be better understood, by using a variety of expressions, by a particular consideration of it, as it were, by parts, than by any short definition.

It includes the exercise of God's perfections to produce a proper effect, in opposition to their lying eternally dormant and ineffectual: as his power being eternally without any act or fruit of that power; his wisdom eternally ineffectual in any wise production, or prudent disposal of any thing, &c.

By "It," JE means God's fulness. God's fulness is that attribute which results in God's nature being expressed outside himself in a way that is active and effective.

The manifestation of his internal glory to created understandings. The communication of the infinite fulness of God to the creature. The creature's high esteem of God, love to him, and complacence and joy in him; and the proper exercises and expressions of these.

These at first view may appear to be entirely distinct things: but if we more closely consider the matter, they will all appear to be ONE thing, in a variety of views and relations. They are all but the emanation of God's glory; or the excellent brightness and fulness of the divinity diffused, overflowing, and as it were enlarged; or in one word, existing and extra. God exercising his perfection to produce a proper effect, is not distinct from the emanation or communication of his fulness: for this is the effect, viz. his fulness communicated, and the producing of this effect is the communication of his fulness; and there is nothing in this effectual exerting of God's perfection, but the emanation of God's internal glory.

There is some rare vocabulary in this set of paragraphs. First, the word "creature" means a created being, such as a human being. Secondly, as explained previously, JE is using the verb "communicate" in an early sense that is now obsolete. In his writing here, it means to "impart," or "give out," rather than to exchange information and meaning, as through language. Thirdly, the word "complacence" means an inclination or motivation to please someone. To say a human being is complacent means that he or she desires to please God.

Now God's internal glory is either in his understanding or will. The glory or fulness of his understanding is his knowledge. The internal glory and fulness of God, having its special [p. 235] seat in his will, is his holiness and happiness. The whole of God's internal good or glory is in these three things, viz. his infinite knowledge; his infinite virtue or holiness, and his infinite joy and happiness.

JE thinks that all of God's attributes whatsoever can be reduced to these three: God's omniscience, God's infinite virtue or goodness, which is synonymous with God's holiness, and God's infinite joy. Notice that he does not include obvious biblical attributes such as God's

love, generosity, justice, power, or faithfulness. In “The Nature of True Virtue,” which he wrote with the intention that it be read following this one, JE will explain that the virtue which is the fountainhead of all others is love. And in “A Treatise on Grace” he will assert that the Holy Spirit is love in the most literal sense possible—specifically, the Holy Spirit is the love between the Father and the Son.<sup>6</sup> Thus, according to JE, when Christians have love in them, that is precisely the same as saying they have the Holy Spirit in them.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed there are a great many attributes in God, according to our way of conceiving them: but all may be reduced to these; or to their degree, circumstances and relations. We have no conception of God’s power, different from the degree of these things, with a certain relation of them to effects. God’s infinity is not properly a distinct kind of good, but only expresses the degree of good there is in him. So God’s eternity is not a distinct good; but is the duration of good. His immutability is still the same good, with a negation of change. So that, as I said, the fulness of the Godhead is the fulness of his understanding, consisting in his knowledge; and the fulness of his will, consisting in his virtue and happiness.

JE thinks God’s will is made up of his virtue (holiness) and his happiness (joy), whatever that means. It’s hard to understand why God’s will doesn’t stem equally from his knowledge—e.g. God’s knowledge of what is conducive to the flourishing of the living beings he creates. Also, JE doesn’t put forward any meaningful explanation of how God’s power could arise from or express some combination of God’s knowledge, holiness, and joy.

And therefore, the external glory of God consists in the communication of these. The communication of his knowledge is chiefly in giving the knowledge of himself: for this is the knowledge in which the fulness of God’s understanding chiefly consists.

God’s infinite knowledge, before the creation, is knowledge of himself. So the chief outward expression of this self-knowledge consists in giving the created beings the knowledge he has of himself.

And thus we see how the manifestation of God’s glory to created understandings, and their seeing and knowing it, is not distinct from an emanation or communication of God’s fulness, but clearly implied in it. Again, the communication of God’s virtue or holiness is principally in communicating the love of himself.

Just as God’s infinite self-knowledge desires to impart itself to created understandings, so, by analogy, God’s infinite self-love desires to express itself beyond the Godhead by communicating (i.e. imparting) the divine self-love to the created being, and causing the created being to love God. This is a radical idea, which JE will continue to unpack below and in the follow-up essay, “The Nature of True Virtue.” He’s saying that God’s chief purpose in imparting love to created beings is not so that created beings will join God in loving and serving the creation, but solely so that they will join him in loving himself.

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<sup>6</sup> *Standing in Grace: A Treatise on Grace*, pp. 43-56. See especially these statements on pp. 48-49: “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 that the Scripture signifies that the Spirit of God is the Love of God, 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.”

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

And thus we see how, not only the creature's seeing and knowing God's excellence, but also supremely esteeming and loving him, belongs to the communication of God's fulness. And the communication of God's joy and happiness consists chiefly in communicating to the creature that happiness and joy which consists in rejoicing in God, and in his glorious excellency; for in such joy God's own happiness does principally consist.

By further analogy, God's infinite joy desires to express itself beyond the Godhead by imparting the divine joy to the created being, and causing the created being to rejoice in God.

And in these things, knowing God's excellency, loving God for it, and rejoicing in it; and in the exercise and expression of these, consists God's honour and praise; so that these are clearly implied in that glory of God, which consists in the emanation of his internal glory.

And though all these things, which seem to be so various, are signified by that glory which the scripture speaks of as the ultimate end of all God's works; yet it is manifest there is no greater, and no other variety in it, than in the internal [p. 236] and essential glory of God itself.

The entirety of God's works, i.e. the creation, has as its one, single ultimate purpose to glorify God. This can be summed up, according to JE, by the creature receiving the knowledge of God, the creature acknowledging God's esteem by loving him, and by the creature participating in the joy of God by taking joy in him. In other words, God created everything other than humanity for the sake of humanity, and God created humanity for the one purpose of adulating God.

God's internal glory is partly in his understanding, and partly in his will. And this internal glory, as seated in the will of God, implies both his holiness and his happiness: both are evidently God's glory, according to the use of the phrase. So that as God's external glory is only the emanation of his internal, this variety necessarily follows. And again, it hence appears that here is no other variety or distinction, but what necessarily arises from the distinct faculties of the creature to which the communication<sup>8</sup> is made, as created in the image of God: even as having these two faculties of understanding and will. God communicates<sup>9</sup> himself to the understanding of the creature, in giving him the knowledge of his glory; and to the will of the creature, in giving him holiness, consisting primarily in the love of God: and in giving the creature happiness chiefly consisting in joy in God. These are the sum of that emanation of divine fulness called in scripture, the glory of God. The first part of this glory is called truth, the latter grace, John i.14. "We beheld his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

Thus we see that the great end of God's works, which is so variously expressed in scripture, is indeed but ONE; and this one end is most properly and comprehensively called, THE GLORY OF GOD; by which name it is most commonly called in scripture; and is fitly compared to an effulgence or emanation of light from a luminary. Light is the external expression, exhibition, and manifestation of the excellency of the luminary, of the sun for instance: It is the abundant, extensive emanation and communication<sup>10</sup> of the fulness of the sun to innumerable beings that partake of it. It is by this that the sun itself is seen, and his glory beheld, and all other things are discovered: it is by a participation of this communication from the sun, that surrounding objects receive all their lustre, beauty, and brightness. It is by this that all nature receives life,

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<sup>8</sup> I.e. *impartation*, here and throughout this dissertation.

<sup>9</sup> I.e. *imparts*, here and throughout this dissertation.

<sup>10</sup> That JE means *impartation* is illustrated by the fact that the contemporary sense of "communicate/communication" does not make sense in relation to what sunlight does to its objects.

comfort, and joy. Light is abundantly used in scripture to represent and signify these three things, knowledge, holiness, and happiness.

What has been said may be sufficient to shew, how those things, which are spoken of in scripture as ultimate ends of God's works, though they may seem at first view to be distinct, are all plainly to be reduced to this one thing, viz. God's internal glory or fulness existing in its emanation. And though [p. 237] God in seeking this end, seeks the creature's good; yet therein appears his supreme regard to himself.

It is in God's eternal nature—apart from creation—to have a drive to express his fulness. In the deepest sense, therefore, God does not bring the creation into being for its own sake, but for the purpose of satisfying his own urge to multiply the love that he has towards himself. If this still seems a slanderous characterization, read on.

The emanation or communication of the divine fulness, consisting in the knowledge of God, love to him, and joy in him, has relation indeed both to God and the creature: but it has relation to God as its fountain, as the thing communicated, is something of his internal fulness. The water in the stream is something of the fountain; and the beams of the sun are something of the sun. And again they have relation to God as their object: for the knowledge communicated is the knowledge of God; and the love communicated, is the love of God:<sup>11</sup> and the happiness communicated, is joy in God. In the creature's knowing, esteeming, loving, rejoicing in, and praising God, the glory of God is both exhibited and acknowledged; his fulness is received and returned. Here is both an emanation and remanation. The fulgence shines upon and into the creature, and is reflected back to the luminary. The beams of glory come from God, are something of God, and are refunded back again to their original. So that the whole is of God, and in God, and to God; and he is the beginning, and the middle, and the end.

Notice that JE's analogy of the light of the sun has broken down here. In the case of the earth and the things on its surface, things exposed to sunlight have color, thus they not only (1) absorb a portion of the light of the sun, converting it into burgeoning life and growth, but also (2) bounce a portion of the light of the sun in all directions, illuminating other things. Completely contradicting nature, JE pictures all the light of God's glory being reflected back directly to him, as if all of creation were intended to resolve to a vast host of mirrors.

And though it be true that God has respect to the creature in these things; yet his respect to himself, and to the creature, are not properly a double and divided respect. What has been said (chap. I. sect. 3, 4) may be sufficient to shew this. Nevertheless, it may not be amiss here briefly to say a few things; though mostly implied in what has been said already.

When God was about to create the world, he had respect to that emanation of his glory, which is actually the consequence of the creation, both with regard to himself and the creature. He had regard to it as an emanation from himself, a communication of himself, and, as the thing communicated, in its nature returned to himself, as its final term. And he had regard to it also as the emanation was to the creature, and as the thing communicated was in the creature, as its subject.

And God had regard to it in this manner, as he had a supreme regard to himself, and value for his own infinite, internal glory. It was this value for himself that caused him to value and seek that his internal glory should flow forth from himself. It was from his value for his glorious perfections of wisdom, righteousness, &c. that he valued the proper exercise and effect of these perfections, in wise and righteous acts [p. 238] and effects. It was from his infinite value for his

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<sup>11</sup> That is, love which is directed *towards God*, not the love that God has for his creation.

internal glory and fulness, that he valued the thing itself communicated, which is something of the same, extant in the creature. Thus because he infinitely values his own glory, consisting in the knowledge of himself, love to himself, and complacence and joy in himself; he therefore valued the image, communication, or participation of these in the creature. And it is because he values himself, that he delights in the knowledge, and love, and joy of the creature; as being himself the object of this knowledge, love, and complacence. For it is the necessary consequence of true esteem and love that we value others' esteem of the same object, and dislike the contrary. For the same reason, God approves of others' esteem and love of himself.

The central, and indeed ultimate, motivation in God for creating us is this: he loves himself infinitely, and desires to bring into being personal beings who will add yet more love of him to the love with which he loves himself. This is a radical position. JE is really saying exactly what he appears to be saying: that God does not, in the ultimate sense, love us for our own sake, but only for the sake of the love that we will give to him, adding to, and helping him to express, his own self-love. The last two sentences even go so far as to say that the thing that God loves about us is the fact that we love what he loves—i.e. him.

Thus it is easy to conceive, how God should seek the good of the creature, consisting in the creature's knowledge and holiness, and even his happiness, for a supreme regard to himself; as his happiness arises from that which is an image and participation of God's own beauty: and consists in the creature's exercising a supreme regard to God, and complacence in him; in beholding God's glory, in esteeming and loving it, and rejoicing in it, and in his exercising and testifying love and supreme respect to God: which is the same thing with the creature's exalting God as his chief good, and making him his supreme end.

And though the emanation of God's fulness, intended in the creation, is to the creature as its object; and though the creature is the subject of the fulness communicated, which is the creature's good; yet it does not necessarily follow, that even in so doing, God did not make himself his end.

JE is actually taking the trouble to *underline* his previous assertion that God is not loving us in any way that does not ultimately serve himself.

It comes to the same thing. God's respect to the creature's good, and his respect to himself, is not a divided respect; but both are united in one, as the happiness of the creature aimed at is happiness in union with himself. The creature is no further happy with this happiness which God makes his ultimate end, than he becomes one with God. The more happiness the greater union; when the happiness is perfect, the union is perfect. And as the happiness will be increasing to eternity, the union will become more and more strict and perfect; nearer and more like to that between God the Father and the Son; who are so united that their interest is perfectly one.—If the happiness of the creature be considered in the whole of the [p. 239] creature's eternal duration, with all the infinity of its progress, and infinite increase of nearness and union to God; in this view, the creature must be looked upon as united to God in an infinite strictness.

When JE says “strictness” here, he means “closeness.” This is a sense of the word that comes from Latin, and is now obsolete. His picture of eternity is of all saved beings getting closer and closer to God in love and adoration, so that something like complete merging will always be being approached but never completed. (Otherwise there would no longer be any distinction between Creator and creation. See below.) There is no thought here of love between created beings; no idea of the redeemed serving creation, restoring the intention of God for humanity

in Genesis 1:26-28. There is no awareness of a recreated, renewed, and glorified living world (Rom. 8:18-23; Rev. 21-22), no trace of the revelation of God's character in Jesus, who says, "I am among you as one who serves" (Jn 13:12-17). Everything is about God receiving complete and rapt attention and love from the beings he brings into existence for the sole purpose of helping him aduluate himself.

If God has respect to something in the creature, which he views as of everlasting duration, and as rising higher and higher through that infinite duration, and that not with constantly diminishing (but perhaps an increasing) celerity;<sup>12</sup> then he has respect to it, as, in the whole, of infinite height; though there never will be any particular time when it can be said already to have come to such a height.

Let the most perfect union with God be represented by something at an infinite height above us: and the eternally increasing union of the saints with God, by something that is ascending constantly towards that infinite height, moving upwards with a given velocity; and that is to continue thus to move to all eternity. God who views the whole of this eternally increasing height, views it as an infinite height. And if he has respect to it, and makes it his end, as in the whole of it, he has respect to it as an infinite height, though the time will never come when it can be said it has already arrived at this infinite height.

God aims at that which the motion or progression which he causes, aims at, or tends to. If there be many things supposed to be so made and appointed, that by a constant and eternal motion, they all tend to a certain centre; then it appears that he who made them, and is the cause of their motion, aimed at that centre; that term of their motion, to which they eternally tend, and are eternally, as it were, striving after.—And if God be the centre, then God aimed at himself. And herein it appears, that as he is the first author of their being and motion, so he is the last end, the final term to which is their ultimate tendency and aim.

When humanity loves God more and more for all eternity, that is God endlessly loving himself. In ultimate terms, God never loves anything other than himself at all. The love that he communicates (i.e. imparts) to human beings is God's self-love, which he imparts to them so that they will return it in full, and they do, in fact, return it in full.

We may judge of the end that the Creator aimed at, in the being, nature, and tendency he gives the creature, by the mark or term which they constantly aim at in their tendency and eternal progress; though the time will never come, when it can be said it is attained to, in the most absolutely perfect manner.

But if strictness of union to God be viewed as thus infinitely exalted; then the creature must be regarded as nearly and closely united to God. And viewed thus, their interest must [p. 240] be viewed as one with God's interest; and so is not regarded properly with a disjunct and separate, but an undivided respect. And as to any difficulty of reconciling God's not making the creature his ultimate end, with a respect properly distinct from a respect to himself; with his benevolence and free grace, and the creature's obligation to gratitude, the reader must be referred to chap. I. sect. 4. obj. 4. where this objection has been considered and answered at large.

JE did not in fact answer objection 4 in any way that would reassure a created being that God had any regard for their well-being—apart from what they could give him. See that section

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<sup>12</sup> I.e. *rapidity* or *pace* or *enthusiasm*. The flow of love towards God is going to increase over time, rather than slowing down or tapering off, as it often does in human relationships.

above.

If by reason of the strictness of the union of a man and his family, their interest may be looked upon as one, how much more so is the interest of Christ and his church,— whose first union in heaven is unspeakably more perfect and exalted, than that of an earthly father and his family—if they be considered with regard to their eternal and increasing union? Doubtless it may justly be esteemed so much one, that it may be sought, not with a distinct and separate, but an undivided respect. It is certain that what God aimed at in the creation of the world, was the good that would be the consequence of the creation, in the whole continuance of the thing created.

Creation is not valued by God, and the good of the creation is not sought by God, for its own sake. What counts is “the good that would be the consequence of the creation,” i.e. God getting love and adulation.

It is no solid objection against God aiming at an infinitely perfect union of the creature with himself, that the particular time will never come when it can be said, the union is now infinitely perfect. God aims at satisfying justice in the eternal damnation of sinners: which will be satisfied by their damnation, considered no otherwise than with regard to its eternal duration. But yet there never will come that particular moment when it can be said, that now justice is satisfied. But if this does not satisfy our modern free-thinkers, who do not like the talk about satisfying justice with an infinite punishment; I suppose it will not be denied by any, that God, in glorifying the saints in heaven with eternal felicity, aims to satisfy his infinite grace or benevolence, by the bestowment of a good infinitely valuable, because eternal: and yet there never will come the moment when it can be said, that now this infinitely valuable good has been actually bestowed.

JE thinks it is quibbling to say that unless perfect union is achieved, God’s purpose will not ever be achieved. He would say that the perfection of the union may be regarded as having been achieved when the entire run of humanity’s eternal deepening in love and adulation is considered by God’s infinite mind. He makes an analogy: in the same way, God’s infinite justice is served by God’s everlasting punishment of the damned, even though that is never finished either.

All of this brings up a puzzling question: If the whole reason for creation as a whole is to create an everlasting adulation chorus for God, what use does God have for those creatures that don’t adulate him? JE appears to have thrown away everything else in creation as disposable props and scenery in the grand play of God’s planting and harvesting creatures to serve in the everlasting admiration chorus. Why does JE’s God not simply discard—along with all of obsolete physical creation—any intelligent creatures that do not serve this purpose? I certainly wouldn’t want, for example, to assume that JE pictures God as the sort of petty deity who would be endlessly furious at his creatures, and endlessly desirous of their intense suffering, simply because they did not give him the total adulation to which he regards himself as entitled. But what else could be the motivation? Surely not justice, given that the biblical teaching about justice as such never threatens mortals with anything beyond physical death. “The person who sins will die,” says God in Ezekiel (Ezek. 18:20), and this principle is repeated in various ways more than 300 times in the pages of the Bible. We’ll have to see what JE says about everlasting torment, and find out if he is able to articulate a reason for it that fits into his grand synthesis around the concept of “the glory of God.”

**Part 2.**  
**Commentary on Jonathan Edwards, “The Nature of True Virtue” (c. 1755)**

**Introduction**

JE composed this dissertation on virtue with the specific intention that it be read together with “Concerning the End.” As you’ll see below, he actually refers the reader to “Concerning the End” as “the preceding discourse.” The two pieces (this one clearly intended to be read second) complement one another. As a pair they offer a global sketch of JE’s theology and eschatology.

**Chapter I**  
***Showing Wherein the Essence of True Virtue Consists***

I suppose I shall not depart from the common opinion when I say, that virtue is the beauty of the qualities and exercises of the heart, or those actions which proceed from them. So that when it is enquired, what is the nature of true virtue? This is the same as to enquire what that is, which renders any habit, disposition, or exercise of the heart truly beautiful?

...

True virtue most essentially consists in *benevolence to being in general*. Or perhaps, to speak more accurately, it is that consent, propensity and union of heart to being in general, which is immediately exercised in a general good will.

If this definition of virtue sounds strangely weak and nebulous, that is because it is. It doesn’t make any obvious sense on its own. But as he gets into his topic, JE will unpack it and we’ll see where he’s going with it. There is a specific reason why he has carved out such an abstract-sounding definition of benevolence.

It is abundantly plain by the holy scriptures, and generally allowed, not only by Christian divines, but by the more considerable Deists that virtue most essentially consists in love. And I suppose it is owned by the most considerable writers, to consist in general love of benevolence, or kind affection: though it seems to me the meaning of some in this affair is not sufficiently explained; which perhaps occasions some error or confusion in discourses on this subject.

JE is making the move to equate *benevolence* with what the scriptures call *love*. This is a reasonable equation, especially in the literature of the NT. Agape love can be defined as the free and active desire for the well-being of the other. In other words, agape is a good will that desires the well-being of the beloved, completely independent of any potential return of benefit to the one that loves from the person they love (e.g. Mt. 5:43-48). We could even call agape love “selfless love.” Agape love is consistently attributed to God in the NT.

When I say true virtue consists in love to being in general, I shall not be likely to be understood, that no one act of the mind or exercise of love is of the nature of true virtue, but what has being in general, or the great system of universal existence, for its direct and immediate object: so that no exercise of love, or kind affection to any one particular being, that is but a small part of this whole, has any thing of the nature of true virtue. But that the nature of true virtue consists in a disposition to benevolence towards being in general; though from such a disposition may arise exercises of love to particular beings, as objects are presented and occasions arise.

JE explains that he's not saying that every particular act of benevolence has to be *consciously* directed to the benefit of "being in general." But particular acts, in order to be truly virtuous, have to come out of a general and widely-cast love, rather than stemming from a narrow disposition towards the well-being of the immediate object alone. Otherwise (he implies) what is being expressed is preference for one being over others, and that—if natural and normal—is not virtuous in any fundamental sense. He goes on:

No wonder that he who is of a generally benevolent disposition, should be more disposed than another to have his heart moved with benevolent affection to particular persons, with whom he is acquainted and conversant, and from whom arise the greatest and most frequent occasions for exciting his benevolent temper. But my meaning is, that no affections towards particular persons or beings are of the nature of true virtue, but such as arise from a generally benevolent temper, or from that habit or frame of mind, wherein consists a disposition to love being in general.

JE is saying that it's no criticism of truly loving persons that they typically express their love towards those in relatively close proximity to them—as though that manifested a narrowness of their love. No, people with true and general benevolence will naturally manifest that benevolence towards all those they encounter in the course of their routine of life.

Love is commonly distinguished into love of benevolence, and love of complacence. Love of benevolence is that affection or propensity of the heart to any being, which causes it to incline to its well-being, or disposes it to desire and take pleasure in its happiness. And if I mistake not, it is agreeable to the common Opinion, that beauty in the object is not always the ground of this propensity; but that there may be a disposition to the welfare of those that are not considered as beautiful, unless mere existence be accounted a beauty.

JE means here the love *which is* benevolence and the love *which is* complacence,<sup>13</sup> not love which has as its object benevolence or complacence. We've already seen his definition of love as benevolence. And he goes on to point out that it is part of the definition of benevolence that it is not deserved. Benevolent love wishes the other well not on the basis that they are more beautiful or worthy than someone else, but simply because they exist.

And benevolence or goodness in the divine Being is generally supposed, not Only to be prior to the beauty of many of its objects, but to their existence; so as to be the ground both of their existence and their beauty, rather than the foundation of God's benevolence; as it is supposed that it is God's goodness which moved him to give them both being and beauty.

According to the common assumptions of JE's time, complacence, the desire to please someone, arises because the one who loves finds the beloved beautiful. In general terms, this could be thought of as romantic love or *eros*. For example, when a young man finds a woman beautiful, and falls in love with her, he discovers in himself a desire to give her flowers or presents that will please her. This kind of love doesn't apply to God, because God's love for people is already there before he ever creates them, so they have no existence, let alone beauty, upon which his love could be based. He has to love (the idea of) their being for its own sake.

What is commonly called love of complacence, presupposes beauty. For it is no other than delight in beauty; or complacence in the person or being beloved for his beauty. If virtue be

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<sup>13</sup> In 18<sup>th</sup>-century English, "complacence" is an alternative spelling for complaisance, and means an inclination or motivation to please someone. It has nothing to do with being complacent.

the beauty of an intelligent being, and virtue consists in love, then it is a plain inconsistency, to suppose that virtue primarily consists in any love to its object for its beauty; either in a love of complacence, which is delight in a being for his beauty, or in a love of benevolence, that has the beauty of its object for its foundation. For that would be to suppose, that the beauty of intelligent beings primarily consists in love to beauty; or that their virtue first of all consists in their love to virtue. Which is an inconsistency, and going in a circle. Because it makes virtue, or beauty of mind, the foundation or first motive of that love wherein virtue originally consists, or wherein the very first virtue consists; or, it supposes the first virtue to be the consequence and effect of virtue. Which makes the first virtue both the ground and the consequence, both cause and effect of itself.

The idea that love is the foundational virtue cannot be wedded with the idea that love arises from the beauty of its object. After all, virtue is the deepest form of beauty in a personal being. Holding these two ideas together would result in affirming that virtue is that which arises from virtue. You'd end up with a vicious circle, and wouldn't be affirming anything at all.

Nor can virtue primarily consist in gratitude; or one being's benevolence to another for his benevolence to him. Because this implies the same inconsistency. For it supposes a benevolence prior to gratitude, which is the cause of gratitude. The first benevolence cannot be gratitude.

The same principle applies. Virtue, or benevolence, or unconditional love, cannot be something that arises from any prior virtue, benevolence, or love in the object.

Therefore there is room left for no other conclusion, than that the primary object of virtuous love is being, simply considered; or that true virtue primarily consists, not in love to any particular beings, because of their virtue or beauty, nor in gratitude, because they love us; but in a propensity and union of heart to being simply considered; exciting absolute benevolence, if I may so call it, to being in general. I say true virtue primarily consists in this.

Actually, there is room for another conclusion, one that JE does not consider. It is this: (1) God freely values the being and the wellbeing of the creation, and of all the individual beings in it. (2) This choice on God's part exists prior to any act of creation, and, in fact, motivates God's act of creation. God creates the universe and all of its beings because they are worth creating. The creation is, in the words of Gen. 1:31, "very good." God did not *discover* this upon creating the world; God *determined* this, and it was so, just as "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Gen. 1:3). (3) For reasons similar to those JE stated above, this sovereign choice on God's part cannot be analyzed as finding its basis in any prior value or deservingness on the part of creation. It is God's choice, and it cannot be explained by anything other than itself. It is an irreducible theological axiom. (4) Virtue in contingent beings created to be a children of God consists in their imitation of their divine parent. When we choose to love our fellow created beings freely and unconditionally, we join God; we get in sync with God our Parent, who loves them freely and unconditionally. True virtue, and true growth into maturity as God's children, is to agree with the love of God and to join God in loving. As John says,

My loved ones, let's love one another, because love is from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. Those who live in love live in God, and God in them.<sup>14</sup>

JE, on the other hand, has landed on the idea that true virtue is "union of the heart...to being

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<sup>14</sup> 1 Jn 4:7-8; see also 1 Jn 2:5-11; 3:1-3, 10-11, 16-18, 23; 4:9-13, 16-17, 19-21.

simply considered; exciting absolute benevolence...to being in general." Love has become an abstraction that does not, in its purest form, focus itself on any particular personal being at all.

The first object of a virtuous benevolence is being, simply considered; and if being, simply considered, be its object, then being in general is its object; and what it has an ultimate propensity to is the highest good of being in general.

Further, if *being*, simply considered, be the first object of a truly virtuous benevolence, then that object who has most of being, or has the greatest share of existence, other things being equal, so far as such a being is exhibited to our faculties, will have the greatest share of the propensity and benevolent affections of the heart.

Whoever has the greatest quantity of the abstract property of "being" (whatever that is) deserves the greatest quantity of love. It may be becoming apparent that JE is getting ready to make a move parallel to the one he made in *The End for Which God Created the World*: God has infinitely more being than anyone and anything else—including the universe as a whole. So God is deserving of infinitely more love than anyone or anything else. JE will eventually spell that out below. But notice what happens when you try to work this notion out. I say, you ought to love this rock more than that person, because this rock has more being than that person, in that it weighs two tons. Well, he'll reply, I mean *personal* being in general, not just physical being in general. Ok, I say, so should you love this particularly intelligent person more than this person of average intelligence, or this mature adult more than this newborn baby? No, he'll reply, each has essentially an equal portion of personal being. After haggling over it for a moment, I suspect that he'll finally admit that all personal beings have value, all beings deserve love and benevolence, for no other reason than that God says so, and God is sovereign. At this point I need to ask a question that departs from abstract theology and appeals to revelation, which is prior to and foundational for it. What does God's Son Jesus, the revealer *par excellence* of God's deepest nature and character, tell us about the value in which God holds human beings relative to his own value? I'll quote the same saying of Jesus that I pointed out in commenting on JE's parallel move in *The End*: "Father...you sent me and loved them even as you loved me" (Jn 17:23). JE's abstract notions of a quantitative proportionality between being and love can never get off the ground if we start from revelation.

The second object of a virtuous propensity of heart is benevolent being. A secondary ground of pure benevolence is virtuous benevolence itself in its object.

When any one under the influence of general benevolence, sees another being possessed of the like general benevolence, this attaches his heart to him, and draws forth greater love to him, than merely his having existence: because so far as the being beloved has love to being in general, so far his own being is, as it were, enlarged; extends to, and in some sort comprehends being in general.

So, the more being someone has, the greater quantity of general benevolence they're entitled to. And if *they themselves* love being in general, that somehow beefs up their own quantity of being, entitling them to a greater quantity of benevolence in relation to others who, for example, only look out for their own interests and the interests of those close to them.

It is because his heart is thus united to being in general, that he looks on a benevolent propensity to being in general, wherever he sees it, as the beauty of the being in whom it is; an excellency that renders him worthy of esteem, complacence, and the greater good-will.

For he that has a simple and pure good will to general existence, must love that temper in others, that agrees and conspires with itself. A spirit of consent to being must agree with consent to being. That which truly and sincerely seeks the good of others, must approve of, and love which joins with him in seeking the good of others.

JE is getting mixed up between benevolence and affinity. Admittedly, if I love people with agape love, which is unconditional benevolence, it will make me happy to see that so-and-so is also oriented in agape love towards others. But that is not the same thing as loving so-and-so more than I love the others whom so-and-so and I both love. Agape love can neither be based on affinity on the one hand, nor on attractiveness or beauty, on the other hand. When JE says that a person of good will is, for that reason, more beautiful and more worthy of good-will, he falls right into the vicious circle that he was trying to avoid above. But there's a reason he's slipping around here. He's trying to get into position to make the claim that God has infinitely more being than anyone else, so the only true virtue is to love him. Loving him as he deserves will leave over only an infinitesimal portion of love for our fellow created beings. So we will mostly love them in a secondary sense: to the extent that they also love God. Notice that this is a zero-sum analysis of benevolence: it assumes that any being has a fixed quantity of or capacity for benevolence. In this way of thinking, a being that directs a certain quantity of benevolence towards one being automatically possesses that much less benevolence to direct towards another being. Theologically speaking, this zero-sum assumption is highly dubious.

One who loves being in general, will necessarily value good will to being in general, wherever he sees it. But if he sees the same benevolence in two beings, he will value it more in two, than in one only. Because it is a greater thing, more favourable to being in general, to have two beings to favour it, than only one of them. For there is more being that favours being: both together having more being than one alone.

Ok, so I'm imagining Joe standing there, and Joe has a good will towards being in general. Now I'm imagining that Joe is duplicated into Joe 1 and Joe 2, and both have a good will towards being in general. Twice the love, and twice the being! Cool!

So if one being be as great as two, has as much existence as both together, and has the same degree of general benevolence, it is more favourable to being in general, than if there were general benevolence in a being that had but half that share of existence. As a large quantity of gold, with the same quality, is more valuable than a small quantity of the same metal.

It seems foolish, but let's try to keep going with this. So I'm imagining Joe, and now I'm imagining Joe as Double Joe. He's the same Joe, only twice as big, being-wise (whatever that means). He's just as benevolent as before, but somehow, him being twice as big, being-wise, doubles the quantity of his benevolence. Sounds like a bunch of baloney to me, honestly. JE hasn't laid anything like an appropriate theoretical foundation to be able to make this claim.

## **Chapter II** ***Showing How That Love, Wherein True Virtue Consists, Respects the Divine Being and Created Things***

It was observed that the first objective ground of that love wherein true virtue consists, is *being* simply considered: and, as a necessary consequence of this, that being who has the greatest share of universal existence has proportionably the greatest share of virtuous benevolence, so far as such a being is exhibited to the faculties of our minds, other things being equal. But God

has infinitely the greatest share of existence. So that all other being, even the whole universe, is as nothing in comparison of the divine Being.

See? I told you that's where he was going with this.

And if we consider the secondary ground of love, or moral excellency, the same thing will appear. For as God is infinitely the greatest Being, so he is allowed to be infinitely the most beautiful and excellent: and all the beauty to be found throughout the whole creation, is but the reflection of the diffused beams of that Being who hath an infinite fulness of brightness and glory.

Mixing up categories again. JE began by saying that the primary ground (i.e. foundation) of love was benevolence towards being in general. Then he said that the secondary foundation was benevolence towards those beings who themselves display benevolence towards being in general. I think he's now saying that even in this secondary sense God deserves infinitely more love than anything in creation because God is infinitely benevolent. But there are a number of problems floating around here. First, didn't JE just say that God naturally devotes all but an infinitesimal portion of his love towards himself? If that is the case, how does God's infinite self-regard qualify as "benevolence"? Benevolence doesn't seem to be a virtue at all when it is directed towards oneself. Secondly, JE yet again brings in the idea of *beauty*, without taking care to stay out of the vicious circle we have been talking about. According to JE's scheme, the measure of God's *beauty*, or, so to speak, God's "loveableness," in the secondary sense that he's been talking about, ought to consist in the quantity of God's benevolence towards being in general. But the way JE has constructed things, that wraps right around to God all over again. He is to be esteemed because he has infinite being, and he is also to be esteemed secondarily because he (infinitely) esteems (his own) infinite being. God's unconditional love for the creation, and created beings' unconditional love for their fellow created beings, are getting completely lost in the shuffle here.

If it should be objected, that virtue consists primarily in benevolence, but that our fellow-creatures, and not God, seem to be the most proper objects of our benevolence; inasmuch as our goodness extendeth not to God, and we cannot be profitable to him. To this I answer,

...

Whatever influence such an objection may seem to have on the minds of some, yet is there any that owns the being of a God, who will deny that any benevolent affection is due to God, and proper to be exercised towards him? If no benevolence is to be exercised towards God, because we cannot profit him, then for the same reason, neither is gratitude to be exercised towards him for his benefits to us: because we cannot requite him. But where is the man who believes a God and a providence, that will say this?

I actually agree with JE on this. It is possible, and proper, to wish God well. Jesus' prayer, "May your name be treated as holy...may your will be done" (Mt. 6:9-10) reads to me more like a blessing on God, a wish that God's name would be treated well and that God's intentions would come to full fruition, than like a prayer that one is asking God to answer.

[If you grant that God] is the proper object of our love, then it does not hinder that he should be loved according to his dignity, or according to the degree in which he has those things wherein worthiness of regard consists, so far as we are capable of it. But this worthiness, none will deny, consists in these two things, greatness and moral goodness. And those that own a God, do not deny that he infinitely exceeds all other beings in these.

So, “greatness” is now being used to paraphrase “being,” considered as a quantity. And “moral goodness” is being used to paraphrase agape love, or benevolence towards being in general.

But this being a matter of the highest importance, I shall say something further to make it plain that love to God is most essential to true virtue; and that no benevolence whatsoever to other beings can be of the nature of true virtue without it.

And therefore, let it be supposed that some beings, by natural instinct or by some other means, have a determination of mind to union and benevolence to a particular person, or private system,\* which is but a small part of the universal system of being: and that this disposition or determination of mind is independent on, or not subordinate to benevolence to being in general. Such a determination, disposition, or affection of mind is not of the nature of true virtue.

\*It may be here noted, that when hereafter I use such a phrase as private system of being, or others similar, I thereby intend any system or society of beings that contains but a small part of the great system, comprehending the universality of existence. I think that may well be called a private system, which is but an infinitely small part of this great whole we stand related to. I therefore also call that affection private affection, which is limited to so narrow a circle: and that general affection or benevolence, which has being in general for its object.

As he said above, love that focuses its attention on a particular individual, or on a group—no matter how large—is not the deepest kind of virtue. It cannot be called “true virtue.” For example, even my goodwill towards the more than 200 million people in the USA can be seen as the natural affection of patriotism, and not as any profound virtue, if I do not extend it to all the world’s people. Even my whole country is, in relation to the whole world, a “private system.”

I think it is manifest, that no affection limited to any private system, not dependent on, nor subordinate to being in general, can be of the nature of true virtue; and this, whatever the private system be, let it be more or less extensive, consisting of a greater or smaller number of individuals, so long as it contains an infinitely little part of universal existence, and so bears no proportion to the great all-comprehending system. And consequently, that no affection whatsoever to any creature, or any system of created beings, which is not dependent on, nor finitely subordinate to a propensity or union of the heart to God, the supreme and infinite Being can be of the nature of true virtue.

Well, there you have it. Nobody deserves any more than an infinitesimal portion of our love and benevolence in and of themselves. After all, each of us only possesses an infinitesimal—less than infinitesimal, really—portion of the whole quantity of being, when you consider the whole quantity of being as consisting of God (whose being is infinite in relation to creation) plus the creation (whose being is immeasurably, but not infinitely, greater than that possessed by any of us individual beings in it).

From hence also it is evident, that the divine virtue, or the virtue of the divine mind, must consist primarily in love to himself, or in the mutual love and friendship which subsists eternally and necessarily between the several persons in the Godhead, or that infinitely strong propensity there is in these divine persons one to another. There is no need of multiplying words to prove that it must be thus, on a supposition that virtue, in its most essential nature, consists in benevolent affection or propensity of heart towards being in general; and so flowing out to particular beings in a greater or lesser degree, according to the measure of existence and beauty which they are possessed of.

So, in contradiction to the explicit statement of Jesus in Jn 17:23, the quantity of love with which we are loved by God is only infinitesimal in proportion to the quantity of love with which he loves himself. Because we each only possess an infinitesimal portion of being. But be comforted. God will love you a lot more if you love him as he deserves to be loved. As JE said above, those who esteem “being in general” seem to get some kind of credit for having the same amount of being that their love encompasses. Let’s look again at that statement:

When any one under the influence of general benevolence, sees another being possessed of the like general benevolence, this attaches his heart to him, and draws forth greater love to him, than merely his having existence: *because so far as the being beloved has love to being in general, so far his own being is, as it were, enlarged; extends to, and in some sort comprehends being in general.* (my italics)

So, as far as being the recipient of God’s primary virtue of benevolence towards being in general, you can only hope to claim an infinitesimal scrap. On the other hand, if you love God properly, then God, expressing the secondary virtue discussed above, will love you with that benevolence which finds beautiful and loveable those who show a like benevolence towards being in general. In fact, if you love God infinitely, as he deserves, you will get credit, within that secondary mode of God’s love, as though you had as much being as God himself. Now *that* is starting to sound like the amount of love that Jesus was talking about in Jn 17:23. But then again, I guess nobody loves God infinitely, so you can at least count on God loving you as much as you love him. So keep at it.

It will also follow from the foregoing things, that God’s goodness and love to created beings is derived from, and subordinate to his love to himself. \*

\* In what manner it is so, I have endeavoured in some measure to explain in the preceding discourse of God’s end in creating the world.

That’s right, just as JE said in *The End for Which God Created the World*, God’s appreciation of us is founded on, and subordinate to, his appreciation for himself. Whatever infinitesimal benevolence he holds us in for our own sake, that is virtually nothing in relation to the benevolence he holds us in that arises from what he gets out of our love for him.

With respect to the manner in which a virtuous love in created beings, one to another, is dependent on, and derived from love to God, this will appear by a proper consideration of what has been said; that it is sufficient to render love to any created being virtuous, if it arise from the temper of mind wherein consists a disposition to love God supremely. Because it appears from what has been already observed, all that love to particular beings, which is the fruit of a benevolent propensity of heart to being in general, is virtuous love. But, as has been remarked, a benevolent propensity of heart to being in general, and a temper or disposition to love God supremely, are in effect the same thing.

Therefore, if love to a created being comes from that temper or propensity of the heart, it is virtuous.

Thus far, based on the primary virtue being discussed, JE has given us very little foundation for loving one another, since he thinks that we have almost no portion of being in the larger scheme of things. But if my love for my neighbor is an expression of my love for God, then, whatever its relative quantity is, that love is virtuous in me.

However, every particular exercise of love to a creature may not sensibly arise from any exercise of love to God, or an explicit consideration of any similitude, conformity, union or relation to God, in the creature beloved.

JE is saying that in order for your love to be truly virtuous, you don't have to be specifically thinking, "I'm loving God as I'm loving you," nor "You are loveable because I see you expressing the love of God." This, considered in isolation from the larger argument, is a true and fair statement.

The most proper evidence of love to a created being arising from that temper of mind wherein consists a supreme propensity of heart to God, seems to be the agreeableness of the kind and degree of our love to God's end in our creation, and in the creation of all things, and the coincidence of the exercise of our love, in their manner, order, and measure, with the manner in which God himself exercises love to the creature in the creation and government of the world, and the way in which God, as the first cause and supreme disposer of all things, has respect to the creature's happiness in subordination to himself as his own supreme end.

This sentence is more than a mouthful, but its meaning is clear. If you want to discern whether a mode of loving your fellow human being(s) is an expression of the primary virtue of benevolence towards God above all, then you need only ask this question: "In my acts of love towards this person, am I helping them on the road to giving all of their attention to God?"

For the true virtue of created beings is doubtless their highest excellency, and their true goodness, and that by which they are especially agreeable to the mind of their Creator. But the true goodness of a thing must be its agreeableness to its end, or its fitness to answer the design for which it was made. Therefore they are good moral agents, whose temper of mind or propensity of heart, is agreeable to the end for which God made moral agents. But as has been shown, the last end for which God has made moral agents must be the last end for which God has made all things: it being evident, that the moral world is the end of the rest of the world; the inanimate and unintelligent world being made for the rational and moral world, as much as a house is prepared for the inhabitants.

In this paragraph and the previous one, he has begun folding in his conclusions from *The End for Which God Created the World*.

By these things it appears, that a truly virtuous mind, being as it were under the sovereign dominion of love to God, above all things, seeks the glory of God, and makes this his supreme, governing, and ultimate end.

...And so far as a virtuous mind exercises true virtue in benevolence to created beings, it chiefly seeks the good of the creature; consisting in its knowledge or view of God's glory and beauty, its union with God, conformity and love to him, and joy in him.

In the scheme proposed in *The End for Which God Created the World*, the good of the creature consists in doing that which it was created to do, and that which it was created to do is love and adore God. So, looking at it from the point of view of virtuous love, if you love people, you will seek for them to know God's glory and beauty, and love and adore him totally.

### Chapter III *Concerning the Secondary and Inferior Kind of Beauty*

Yet there is another, inferior, secondary beauty, which is some image of this, and which is not peculiar to spiritual beings, but is found even in inanimate things; which consists in a mutual

consent and agreement of different things, in form, manner, quantity, and visible end or design; called by the various names of regularity, order, uniformity, symmetry, proportion, harmony, etc. Such is the mutual agreement of the various sides of a square, or equilateral triangle, or of a regular polygon.

JE is talking about the beauty of proportionality, balance, fittingness, and agreement between elements leading to an integrated harmonious whole.

But there is another and higher beauty in true virtue, and in all truly virtuous dispositions and exercises, than what consists in any uniformity or similarity of various things; viz. the union of heart to being in general, or to God, the being of beings, which appears in those virtues; and of which those virtues, when true, are the various expressions or effects. Benevolence to being in general, or to being simply considered, is entirely a distinct thing from uniformity in the midst of variety, and is a superior kind of beauty.

5. From all that has been observed concerning this secondary kind of beauty it appears, that the disposition which consists in a determination of mind to approve and be pleased with this beauty, considered simply and by itself, has nothing of the nature of true virtue, and is entirely a different thing from a truly virtuous taste.

Appreciation of the natural beauty, appropriateness, or harmony of things—whether from an artistic, philosophical, engineering, legal, scientific, or whatever standpoint, is not in itself a virtue. This chapter doesn't advance JE's thesis particularly, but it responds, for the sake of completeness, to the then-current philosophical discussions on the topic of aesthetics, which is to say, the theory of the nature of beauty and its appreciation.

#### **Chapter IV** *Of Self-Love, and Its Various Influence, to Cause Love to Others, or the Contrary*

I think it plain from what has been observed, that as men may approve and be disposed to commend a benevolent temper from self-love; so the higher the degree of benevolence is, the more may they approve of it. This will account for some kind of approbation, from this principle, even of love to enemies, viz. as a man loving his enemies is an evidence of a high degree of benevolence of temper; the degree of it appearing from the obstacles it overcomes. And it may be here observed, that the consideration of the tendency and influence of self-love may show, how men in general may approve of justice from another ground, besides that approbation of the secondary beauty there is in uniformity and proportion, which is natural to all. Men, from their infancy, see the necessity of it, not only that it is necessary for others or for human society; but they find the necessity of it for themselves, in instances that continually occur; which tends to prejudice them in its favour, and to fix an habitual approbation of it from self-love.

Any approval of love that stems from self-love is not particularly virtuous. It just means that people realize that their own personal interests and well-being will be best served if love and justice are encouraged in society. JE gives only a passing glance to the love of enemies, consideration of which would have presented an opportunity to speak about the unconditional nature of virtuous love—a theme that is strongly and repeatedly emphasized in the teaching of Jesus and the New Testament.

#### **Chapter V** *Of Natural Conscience, and the Moral Sense*

We never could have any notion what understanding or volition, love or hatred are, either in created spirits or in God, if we had never experienced what understanding and volition, love and hatred are in our own minds. Knowing what they are by consciousness, we can deny limits, and remove changeableness and other imperfections, and ascribe them to God. But though men in thinking of others do as it were put themselves in their place, they do it so habitually, instantaneously, and without set purpose, that they can scarce give any account of it, and many would think it strange if they were told of it. In all a man's thoughts of another person, in whatever he apprehends of his moral conduct to others or to himself, if it be in loving or hating him, approving or condemning him, rewarding or punishing him, he necessarily as it were, puts himself in his stead; and therefore the more naturally, easily, and quietly sees whether he, being in his place, should approve or condemn, be angry or pleased as he is.

Our conscience naturally engenders a sense of right and wrong by raising, more or less automatically, within us the questions: "Would I like that if it was done to me? Would it feel fair if it were done to me?"

1. In that disposition to approve or disapprove the moral treatment which passes between us and others, from a determination of the mind to be easy or uneasy, in a consciousness of our being consistent or inconsistent with ourselves.

2. The other thing which belongs to the approbation or disapprobation of natural conscience, is the sense of desert which was spoken of before; consisting as was observed, in a natural agreement, proportion and harmony, between malevolence or injury, and resentment and punishment; or between loving and being loved, between shewing kindness and being rewarded, etc. Both these kinds of approving or disapproving concur in the approbation or disapprobation of conscience: the one founded on the other. Thus when a man's conscience disapproves of his treatment of his neighbour, in the first place he is conscious, that if he were in his neighbour's stead, he should resent such treatment from a sense of justice, or from a sense of uniformity and equality between such treatment, and resentment, and punishment; as before explained. And then in the next place, he perceives that therefore he is not consistent with himself, in doing what he himself should resent in that case; and hence disapproves it, as being naturally averse to opposition to himself.

Conscience goes further than just blaming or praising oneself or others based on a self-ward projection of whatever is the action or attitude under scrutiny. It also takes note of, and is displeased by, inconsistency in oneself and others.

And thus, in particular, we may see in what respect this natural conscience extends to true virtue, consisting in union of heart to being in general, and supreme love to God. For although it sees not, or rather does not taste its primary and essential beauty, i.e. it tastes no sweetness in benevolence to being in general, simply considered, for nothing but general benevolence itself can do that, yet this natural conscience, common to mankind, may approve of it from that uniformity, equality and justice, which there is in it; and the demerit which is seen in the contrary.

...For they must see that consent to being in general, and supreme respect to the Being of beings, is most just; and that every thing which is inconsistent with it, and interferes with it, or flows from the want of it, is unjust and deserves the opposition of universal existence.

You don't have to be a practitioner of love and benevolence in order to discern, by means of the natural conscience, that love and benevolence are praiseworthy, and that actions inconsistent with benevolence and justice are unworthy of approval.

Thus has God established and ordered that this principle of natural conscience, which, though it implies no such thing as actual benevolence to being in general, nor any delight in such a principle, simply considered, and so implies no truly spiritual sense or virtuous taste, yet should approve and condemn the same things that are approved and condemned by a spiritual sense or virtuous taste.

He's paraphrasing what he just said.

But if natural conscience and the disposition of the heart to be pleased with virtue, were the same, then at the same time that the conscience was brought to its perfect exercise, the heart would be made perfectly holy; or would have the exercise of true virtue and holiness in perfect benevolence of temper. But instead of this, their wickedness will then be brought to perfection, and wicked men will become very devils, and accordingly will be sent away as cursed into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

The conscience may see the natural agreement between opposing and being opposed, between hating and being hated, without abhorring malevolence from a benevolent temper of mind, or without loving God from a view of the beauty of his holiness. These things have no necessary dependence one on the other.

Having a conscience doesn't mean that you will love God and join God in loving your fellow created beings; it just means that you will realize that God is just when he condemns you for your sins. JE asserts that when God sharpens the conscience of the wicked at the last judgment, this will turn out to be a catalyst for a multiplication of their wickedness—even though their conscience is working properly.

## Chapter VI *Of Particular Instincts of Nature, Which in Some Respects Resemble Virtue*

Some of these instincts respect only ourselves personally: such are many of our natural appetites and aversions. Some of them are more social, and extend to others: such are the mutual inclinations between the sexes, etc. Some of these dispositions are more external and sensitive: such are those that relate to meat and drink, and the more sensitive inclinations of the sexes towards each other. Others are more internal and mental: consisting in affections which mankind naturally exercise towards some of their fellow-creatures, and in some cases towards men in general. Some of these may be called kind affections; as having something in them of benevolence, or a resemblance of it.

That kind affection which is exercised one towards another in natural relation, particularly the love of parents to their children, called natural affection, is by many referred to instinct. I have already considered this sort of love as an affection that arises from self-love: and in that view, have shown it cannot be of the nature of true virtue.

This is ground already covered. As in Chapter V, he's just covering all the bases, discussing the topics usually covered in theories of ethics and virtue.

For the reasons which have been given, it is undeniably true, that if persons have a benevolent affection limited to a party, or to the nation in general of which they are a part, or the public community to which they belong, though it be as large as the Roman empire was of old: yea, if there could be a cause determining a person to benevolence towards the whole world of mankind, or even all created sensible natures throughout the universe, exclusive of union of heart to general existence and of love to God—not derived from that temper of mind which

disposes to a supreme regard to him, nor subordinate to such divine love—it cannot be of the nature of true virtue.

JE has overstepped himself here. It just doesn't make any sense to say that even if a person who loved "the whole world of mankind, or even all created sensible natures throughout the universe," it would not be true virtue motivating them unless they were doing it out of "a union of heart to general existence." He never made any meaningful case in the first place as to what was better about being benevolently inclined towards "being in general" than towards all sentient beings. Nor did he put forward any believable rational argument that "being in general" is comprised almost entirely—apart from an infinitesimal portion of it—of God's being. That part of his presentation never supported its own weight, but only functioned as a sleight-of-hand move in order to equate the greatest and truest human virtue with love for God. But now he lays out "union of heart to general existence and...love to God" as two rationally separable things, which they obviously are. But when they are separated in this way, (1) his denial that true virtue could be motivating someone who loves every single being in the creation, simply because they have no abstract "union of heart to general existence," sounds sophistic and even foolish, and (2) his denial that true virtue could be motivating such a person if they did not love God assumes what it would need to prove—namely, the Calvinist principle that no one is capable of going anything virtuous whatsoever apart from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

JE invites us to *imagine* a person who truly loves every single sentient being in the creation. If we imagine such a person, then we must imagine that they have comprehended, and are expressing, something of the true virtue of love—even if, not knowing God, they have, on JE's scheme, missed out on its most important object by far. What counts is that such a person is expressing true virtue, not that they are expressing a greater or lesser quantity of it. If such a hypothetical person were to discover that God is, and that God knows them, how endlessly joyful would they be, how happy to give God the boundless love that he deserves? Ah well, JE and any good Calvinist would say, such a person will never actually exist, because human beings apart from relationship with God are totally depraved, and have no true virtue. And that makes my point, which was that JE has overstepped himself. He never argued in this dissertation for the principle of total depravity. He is asserting something that cannot be proven from the foundation he has laid in this essay.

[N]atural pity is of a nature very different from true virtue, and not arising from a disposition of heart to general benevolence; but is owing to a particular instinct, which the Creator has implanted, chiefly for the preservation of mankind, though not exclusive of their well being.

This is a reasonable assertion as far as I am concerned. Like a number of other topics that JE touches on, he includes an analysis of pity because it is a standard topic in a discussion of virtue. It's not integral to the development of his central thesis.

## Chapter VII

### *The Reasons Why Those Things That Have Been Mentioned, Which Have Not the Essence of Virtue, Have Yet by Many Been Mistaken for True Virtue*

...

In many of these natural affections there appears the tendency and effect of benevolence in part. Others have truly a sort of private benevolence, but which in several respects falls short

of the extent of true virtuous benevolence, both in its nature and object. Pity to others in distress, though not properly of the nature of love, as has been demonstrated, yet has partly the same influence and effect with benevolence. One effect of true benevolence is for persons to be uneasy when the objects of it are in distress, and to desire their relief. And natural pity has the same effect.

Thus these things have something of the general nature of virtue. What they are essentially defective in is, that they are private in their nature; they do not arise from any temper of benevolence to being in general, nor have they a tendency to any such effect in their operation.

There's something very unsatisfying about the assertion that pity in particular is "private in nature." The problem here is a little difficult to get a handle on, but it's worth some effort. JE is within his rights to argue that pity, because it is automatic and somatic, is an instinct that points to the virtue of love, rather than love itself—since love is volitional. He's also justified in arguing that when you exclusively love those beings whom you associate with yourself in some way (e.g. my dog, my children, my spouse, my family, my city, my country, members of my transnational religious group), your love resolves to a "private" attachment, no matter how many actual objects it encompasses. But what makes your love "private" (and defective in terms of true virtue) in such cases is *not* the fact that you can theoretically specify the number and individual identity of possible objects of your love. There's simply nothing plausible in the notion that love fails to be virtuous unless it encompasses being in the abstract. No, the proper force of JE's remarks about "private" attachment is that expressions of love remain private, and so remain defective by the standard of true virtue, when the objects of your love only qualify as such through a sense in your mind that they are "yours" in some way. The defect does not come from the fact that your love finds a specific and definable object or objects, but from the fact that your love is *conditional upon the object's relationship with you*. And this is exactly where pity in particular shows itself as the opposite of private attachment. Pity arises *par excellence* when we encounter a being who needs love, with whom we have no prior sense of personal association or identification at all. Pity automatically and immediately expands our circle of attachment to encompass the person in need—regardless of any familiarity or even deservingness on their part.

A counterexample brings this principle into sharp focus. For example, let's imagine that I encounter a man who is a heroin dealer and a pimp, and he has just this moment been badly injured in a car crash, and is suffering great pain. He desperately needs both first aid and an ambulance. Now suppose that I just walk away from his cries for help with the thought, "So much the better—he got what he deserved. I hope he dies. One less dirtbag preying on people." Whatever else could be said of such a response, *it is unquestionably lacking in pity*. Pity, which might better be expressed in today's language as *instinctive compassion*, is a gift of God to us, because it points us, through our very own inbuilt instincts, to the virtue of unconditional love. Love shows itself to be truly virtuous when it shows itself to be *unconditional*, not when it shows itself to be directed towards "being" in some abstract and general sense.

This idea of instinctual compassion as revelatory of the possibility of unconditional love is not simply a philosophical notion—like JE's notions about being in the abstract. It is a pointedly *biblical* principle, which stems from Jesus himself. Jesus *hammers* on the principle that God's love is never conditioned on whether the recipient has any relationship with God, and that therefore our love must never be conditioned on someone's relationship with us (see Mt. 5:43-48; Lk. 6:27-36; 10:25-37 [the Parable of the Good Samaritan]; cf. Rom. 12:14). JE's whole

elaborate scheme has turned this crucial spiritual truth inside out. JE's God conditions his love on the quantity of being that someone has—which entitles JE's God to love himself infinitely. And, since every other being besides JE's God has only an infinitesimal portion of being, they don't deserve more than an infinitesimal portion of God's love. They are, in JE's own words, “as nothing” to him. The only way they become entitled to a greater share of God's love than this is by attaching themselves to God, loving God with all of their capacity. By being *in relationship* with God, they achieve consideration as having a quantity, a weight, of being that potentially stretches out to encompass the infinite being of God himself. The love of JE's God is thus conditional on two things: (1) quantity of being—which is an empty abstraction that he never even attempts to define in any meaningful way, and (2) the potential recipient's relationship with God, i.e. the potential recipient's love for God. The first of these conditions is unbiblical, and the second is anti-biblical.

The reason why men are so ready to take these private affections for true virtue, is the narrowness of their views; and above all, that they are so ready to leave the divine Being out of their view, and to neglect him in their consideration, or to regard him in their thoughts as though he did not properly belong to the system of real existence, but was a kind of shadowy, imaginary being.

The reason why JE is so ready to take anything other than love for God as “private affection,” lacking in true virtue, is the fact that he makes no ontological distinction between God's being and our being. They are both apples, which you can weigh on the same scale. God's apple may be infinitely heavier than ours, but ours and his are both the same sort of thing. This is a fundamental ontological assertion whose terms JE has never even attempted to define, let alone establish. And to my mind, his approach smacks of the very “narrowness of views” that wants to understand the being of God using the same familiar—and even quasi-physical—categories through which we understand everything else. None of this is biblical, or even capable of being reconciled with the Bible's teaching about love.

Thus I have observed how many of these natural principles resemble virtue in its primary Operation, which is benevolence. Many of them also have a resemblance of it in its secondary operation, which is its approbation of, and complacence in virtue itself. Several kinds of approbation of virtue are not of the nature of a truly virtuous approbation, consisting in a sense and relish of the essential beauty of virtue.

I don't have any particular problem with the idea that God has created the world so that we find in it “natural principles” that point us towards the true virtue of benevolence, i.e. unconditional agape love. It is only to be expected that God would help us and guide us in this way.

## Chapter VIII

### *In What Respects Virtue or Moral Good Is Founded in Sentiment; and How Far It Is Founded in the Reason and Nature of Things*

Virtue, as I have observed, consists in the cordial consent or union of being to being in general. And that frame of mind, whereby it is disposed to relish and be pleased with the view of this, is benevolence or union of heart to being in general; or it is an universally benevolent frame of mind.

He's just paraphrasing his central thesis here. He goes on:

Because he whose temper is to love being in general, must therein have a disposition to approve and be pleased with love to being in general.

He is paraphrasing his corollary, that the being that loves being in general will approve of other beings that love being in general. Despite the period after the words “to being in general” above, the “Because” that begins that sentence connects with the “Therefore” in the sentence that follows it:<sup>15</sup>

Therefore now the question is, Whether God, in giving this temper to a created mind, acts so arbitrarily, that there is nothing in the necessary nature of things to hinder, but that a contrary temper might have agreed or consisted as well with that nature of things as this?

Is the disposition to love being in general a matter of arbitrary sentiment, i.e. taste—such that it would be no better or worse, in the ultimate scheme of things, to have no such disposition to love being in general? To put it bluntly, is a disposition towards benevolence akin to a disposition to enjoy spicy food, so that it has no ultimate and necessary significance?

And in the first place, to assert this would be a plain absurdity, and contrary to the very supposition. For here it is supposed, that virtue in its very essence consists in agreement or consent of being to being. Now certainly agreement itself to being in general must necessarily agree better with general existence, than opposition and contrariety to it.

This is pretty abstruse, but here is the gist of what he is saying. (1) We’re discussing whether a disposition towards benevolence—defined as a disposition to agree with (i.e. be happy with) the fact of being in general—is arbitrary, and a mere matter of taste, or whether it is based on the fundamental and necessary rationale and nature of things. (2) But there can’t be any more foundational fact about the nature of things than the ultimate fact of being itself. Therefore (3) agreement with being itself is rational by definition. The last sentence of the above extract amounts to a tautology. His argument has the form of an enthymeme, with principle (2) left unstated. One could try to resist this attempt at a pure a priori argument, but let’s read some more and see where he goes with it.

I observe, secondly, that God in giving to the creature such a temper of mind, gives that which is agreeable to what is by absolute necessity his own temper and nature. For, as observed, God himself is in effect being in general; and without all doubt it is in itself necessary, that God should agree with himself, be united with himself, or love himself: and therefore, when he gives the same temper to his creatures, this is more agreeable to his necessary nature, than the opposite temper: yea, the latter would be infinitely contrary to his nature.

It certainly seems irrational that God, who loves, would impart hate to his creatures; similarly, it would be irrational for God, who, in loving himself, agrees with “being in general,” to impart indifference or even opposition towards “being in general” to beings that he creates. But there’s a major problem here: JE has not laid a proper theoretical foundation in this dissertation for the notion of God “giving” to his creatures a disposition to love him supremely. I understand from reading some of JE’s other writings that he holds a radical Calvinist position that God literally inserts love into human beings.<sup>16</sup> But when he expects for

<sup>15</sup> And not to the previous sentence.

<sup>16</sup> In *A Treatise on Grace*, JE claims that impartation of the Holy Spirit to the redeemed is precisely and specifically to be understood as love for God that is imparted so that we can participate in the love that God has for himself (see *Standing in Grace: A Treatise on Grace*, by Jonathan Edwards [ed. Don Kistler; Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2002], Chapter 3, esp. pp. 43-56).

this assumption simply to be granted at this stage of his dissertation, he throws the whole discussion of benevolence into disarray. How is benevolence a virtue at all, if it is not in some important way native to the benevolent being? I'm not saying that there is no possible coherent answer to this question, but only that JE has suddenly begun expecting his readers to join him in assuming a particular kind of answer that cannot be assumed on the foundation that he has developed.

These things may help us to understand why that spiritual and divine sense, by which those who are truly virtuous and holy perceive the excellency of true virtue, is in the sacred scriptures called by the name of light, knowledge, understanding, etc. If this divine sense were a thing arbitrarily given, without any foundation in the nature of things, it would not properly be called by such names.

Here he supplements his a priori argument with an a posteriori argument. If people's inbuilt sense of virtue were, in principle, merely a matter of taste, then Scripture wouldn't refer to a right sense of virtue as "knowledge" and "understanding." He'll go on from here to haggle for a few more pages with those who think ethics and morals come from sentiment rather than reason, and the dissertation will wind down to a rather low-key finish. These are really just loose ends. He's in dialogue with the major ethicists of his day, such as Francis Hutcheson (whose name he spells as "Hutchison") and David Hume, and he has to cover all the major bases that they cover.

### **Overview and Critique of the Paradigm of Virtue that Jonathan Edwards Has Developed in This Dissertation**

JE's theory of virtue, based on general benevolence or love, can be characterized as follows:

1. True virtue in a sentient being, above all, consists in that being's love for "being in general," which is to say, love for the totality of being. If one directs one's love to anything less than the totality of being, one is only attaching one's love to a "private system," which is not true virtue.
2. The totality of being consists of God and the creation. As a proportion of this totality, the entirety of creation is only possessed of the barest infinitesimal scrap of being, because God is characterized by an infinite quantity of being. Thus God properly, and virtuously, holds himself in infinite regard, and regards the creation—and everything and everyone in it—"as nothing." God loves himself infinitely, in keeping with the infinity of his being, and God loves the creation infinitesimally in relation to his own self-love, in keeping with the relative quantity of its being. It is God's true virtue that he should thus love himself and the creation. True virtue loves things as they deserve to be loved, which is in proportion to the quantity of being that they possess.
3. The being with true virtue, i.e. the being that loves all things in proportion to their quantity of being, and above all loves the totality of being, naturally approves of, which is to say, holds in surplus regard and love, beings that agree with its proper valuation of being. Given that being is valuable, certainly beings that regard being as valuable are valuable to have around—above and beyond the value that they have simply by virtue of their innate portion of being.
4. No matter how infinitesimal a portion of being a being has, it can upgrade the regard (which is to say, the *love*) in which it deserves to be held, by holding "being in general," the total quantity of being, in proper regard. Somehow, this valuing of "being in general" lends a kind

of virtual quantity of being to the being that values “being in general.” This upgrading of value or love-worthiness only works in proportion to the quantity of love such a being has, and JE does not go into the question of how much love a finite being is capable of. For human beings, this means that we don’t know how much excess value we can achieve for ourselves by loving God “with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength” (Deut. 6:4-5). All we know is that it will help us put on weight, so to speak. JE only states that *to the extent that* a being loves the totality of being, such a being virtually increases its own quantity of being:

When any one under the influence of general benevolence [such as God, *par excellence*], sees another being possessed of the like general benevolence, this attaches his heart to him, and draws forth greater love to him, than merely his having existence: because so far as the being beloved has love to being in general, so far his own being is, as it were, enlarged; extends to, and in some sort comprehends being in general.

JE’s paradigm has profound theological implications:

1. God’s love towards the creation, to the extent that it is unconditional, is infinitesimal in proportion to his self-love.
2. The quantity of God’s love towards ourselves, as sentient beings within his creation, increases in direct proportion to the quantity of our love towards him.
3. To be in line with true virtue, all but an infinitesimal portion our (human) unconditional love should be directed towards God. We should not love human beings for their own sake, but only to the extent that loving them results in their loving God. Our conditional love, which is to say, that excess love in which we hold our fellow beings because they too love God, can be as great as we like, since all such love ultimately goes to God’s account. *The precise thing we’re loving about them is the fact that they love God.*
4. There is no basis whatsoever in this paradigm for the repeated command of Jesus that his followers should love their enemies and those who live destructively. After all, (1) we’ve seen that the principle of unconditional love based on proportion of being as a whole provides scant foundation for loving anyone or anything in creation, let alone your enemy, and (2) the principle of excess love based on another being’s “agreement with being in general” would appear to work both ways. If a being does not agree with being (as evidenced by its hateful attitudes and destructive actions), that ought, on JE’s reckoning, to detract from whatever infinitesimal claim it ever had to be loved. There is, in fact, no theoretical reason why such a being could not go into deficit in relation to the love it deserved.
5. In the final analysis, JE’s assumptions about the nature of God in *Concerning the Nature of True Virtue* reveal themselves as identical to those in *Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*. In JE’s world, God is totally selfish and self-centered. His love for human beings appears to be more or less entirely contingent on whether and to what extent they love him. JE completely ignores and even contradicts the Bible’s most foundational statement of theological anthropology, namely, that human beings—regardless of whether they believe it or act like it—are created by God and regarded by God as God’s own *children*. If we apply this crucial theological fact to JE’s ethical scheme, we see that Jesus teaches us that human beings—even sinful ones—are held within the

circle of God's "private system," i.e. God's own *family*. This makes grotesque JE's claim that God regards us—along with the entire creation—as less than specks of dust.

In summary, the God of Jonathan Edwards looks utterly unlike Jesus Christ, and utterly unlike the unconditionally loving, self-giving, and even self-sacrificial God that Jesus Christ reveals to us through his life, his teachings, his ministry of healing, and his willingness to face death at our hands. The rash-sounding prediction that I quoted from *The End of the Unrepentant* at the beginning of this commentary would seem to be no less than fully justified:

In this system, God is characterized as though he is the Great Narcissist, who makes creatures in his own image so that they can adore him. He loves them not for their own sake, but for the sake of what they can give him. The love of a deity whose greatest concerns are adulation from and control over his creatures offers no example for loving your neighbor as yourself.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> From *The End of the Unrepentant*, "The Theology of Total Domination and Infinite Vindictiveness," in Chapter 8: The End of the Unrepentant: Hermeneutical and Theological Conclusion.