

**Union with God and the Singularity of God's End in Creating:  
Jonathan Edwards' *Concerning the End for which God Created the World***

Why did God create the world? For what reason(s), if any, did God create?

Jonathan Edwards' answer is that God not only had a purpose for creating, but a singular purpose: God's self-communication to creatures. God is inclined toward this end out of regard to himself as well as to creatures. This dual-regard forms a single end, in view of the progressive union between God and creation. How Jonathan Edwards comes to this answer will be explored by a series of theses, each of which corresponds to a section assigned for this week. The purpose of these theses is twofold: to defend a master-thesis about the text as a whole and to guide our discussion of the text in its constituent parts.

**Master-Thesis: The purpose of Edwards' dissertation is to argue for the singularity of God's end in creating. God creates out of regard for himself, which *includes* God's regard for sentient creatures in view of their progressive union with him.**

My thesis entails two claims: (a) that Edwards argues for the singularity of God's end in creating, and (b) that this argument is the main theme of Edwards' dissertation. The first claim is uncontroversial, though how Edwards gets there is interesting and subject to interpretation. The second, bolder claim requires justification. I will seek to support this second claim by means of an elaboration of the first claim, showing how Edwards' argument for God's singular end in creation shapes the dissertation as a whole.

Edwards argues for the singularity of God's creative purpose in three steps: first, by arguing that in God's act of creating, God makes *himself* his own end; second, that God's consequential ends in creation are *also* intrinsically valuable to God; and third, that

these first two claims are not incompatible in view of the progressive union between God and creatures. Since the three steps of this argument correspond exactly to the first three sections of chapter one, my master thesis (that this argument is the main theme of Edwards' dissertation) appears warranted. The following exposition will elaborate each of these steps as well as indicate how the remaining sections fit into this argument.

**Thesis 1: The governing question of Edwards' dissertation is whether God's end in creating is singular or plural.**

Although he addresses a number of significant problems in the course of his exposition, the question of the unity of God's creative purpose recurs throughout the dissertation. Only the remainder of my exposition can show how each step in Edwards' argument serves to answer this question. Nevertheless, thesis 1 may be initially corroborated by noting the prominence of this question at the beginning and the end of Edwards' dissertation.

***Corroboration A: The introduction sets this question as the agenda.***

Although the explicit purpose of the introduction is the explanation of terms, Edwards identifies the larger problem he aims to address. After distinguishing between chief and ultimate ends, Edwards suggests that there may be a being for whom a whole series of actions serve one end: "if any being had but one ultimate end in all that he does, and there be a great variety of operation, his last end may justly be looked upon as his *supreme* end."<sup>1</sup> In such a case, one's chief end and ultimate end would be the same thing: "the ultimate end of all must be valued more than any one of the particular means" (410).

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "Concerning the End for which God Created the World," in Paul Ramsey, ed., *Ethical Writings, The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 8 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 410, italics original. Hereafter cited in-text.

Edwards hints that “[t]his seems to be the case with the works of God” (410). But he goes on to note that one may have *multiple* supreme ends:

if an agent in his works has in view more things than one that will be brought to pass by what he does, that are agreeable to him, considered in themselves ...— then he must have more things than one that he regards as his last ends in what he does. But if there be but one thing that an agent seeks, as the consequence of what he does that is agreeable to him, on its own account: then there can be but one last end which he has in all his actions and operations (411).

Although these ultimate ends may be crucially distinguished as either original or consequential, Edwards leaves open the question concerning the singularity of God’s end in creation. In the final paragraph of the introduction, Edwards sets up the two possibilities:

if there be but one thing that is originally, and independent on any future supposed cases, agreeable to God, to be obtained by the creation of the world, then there can be but one last end of God’s work, in this highest sense: but if there are various things, properly diverse one from another, that are, absolutely and independently on the supposition of any future given cases, agreeable to the Divine Being, which are actually obtained by the creation of the world, then there were several ultimate ends of the creation, in that highest sense (415).

As we shall see, the remainder of the dissertation seeks to argue for the first: the complex singularity of God’s end in creating. But from the beginning, the question is being raised.

***Corroboration B: The “conclusion” explicitly answers this question (Ch. II, Sec. VII).***

Given the title of the final section in Edwards’ dissertation (“Showing That the Ultimate End of the Creation of the World is But One, and What That One End Is”), this thesis is uncontroversial. What is interesting is that this section ought to be read as the conclusion of the whole dissertation and not only as the conclusion of chapter two. This concluding section answers the question raised by the introduction, forming an arc under which the whole dissertation labors. More attention will be given to the material content of this section at the close of my exposition.

**Thesis 2: God's highest end in creating must be himself (Ch. I, Sec. I)**

The first step in Edwards' argument is to assert that God's end in creating is himself. Edwards comes to this conclusion by identifying three of conditions God's end must satisfy. (1) Whatever God's end in creating is, it cannot imply a deficiency in God on account of God's aseity: "That no notion of God's last end in the creation of the world is agreeable to reason which would truly imply or infer 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" (420).

Therefore, God's end in creation must be something internal to his being. (2)

Furthermore, this end must have intrinsic value: "Whatsoever is good and valuable in itself is worthy that God should value for itself" (421). (3) To be God's highest end, this end must be "in itself most valuable" (421). Edwards concludes that the only being which satisfies these conditions is God himself: "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 beings" (421). God's own self-regard thus governs all his works *ad extra*.

The final two points of this section serve as a transition to the next section by raising the problem of the unity of God's ends. On the one hand, reason dictates that God is his own end. On the other hand, we can infer from what God actually accomplishes that God values something other than merely himself: "Whatsoever thing is actually the effect or consequence of the creation of the world, which is simply and absolutely good

and valuable in itself, that thing is an ultimate end of God's creating the world... For we may justly infer what God intends by what he actually does" (427). Edwards explores what God "actually does" in the following section.

**Thesis 3: God's consequent ends in creating are intrinsically valuable (Ch. I, Sec. II)**

The second step in Edwards' argument is to assert that God's consequent ends are also intrinsically valuable and thus part of God's ultimate end in creating. Edwards identifies four intrinsically valuable consequences of God's creation of the world. This list need not be exhaustive to prove that God values what God actually does in creating the world. These ends are not means to other ends but intrinsically valuable ends-in-themselves. (1) The *exercise of God's attributes* is intrinsically valuable: "As God therefore esteems these attributes themselves valuable, and delights in them, so 'tis natural to suppose that he delights in their proper exercise and expression" (430). (2) The *knowledge of God* is intrinsically valuable: "'Tis a thing infinitely good in itself that God's glory should be known by a glorious society of created beings" (431). (3) The *love of God* is intrinsically valuable: "If the perfective itself be excellent, the knowledge of it is excellent, and so is the esteem and love of it excellent" (432).<sup>2</sup> (4) The *emanation of God's being* is intrinsically valuable: "as this fullness is capable of communication or emanation *ad extra*; so it seems a thing amiable and valuable in itself that it should be communicated or flow forth" (433).

The intrinsic value of these four consequent ends is problematic for Edwards, because they in some sense compete with the supreme value of God's own self as God's end in creation. Edwards begins to address this problem by means of a caveat at the end

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<sup>2</sup> N.B.: for Edwards, (2) and (3) correspond to the procession of the Son and the Spirit.

of this section. “But here as much as possible to avoid confusion, I observe that there is some impropriety in saying that a disposition in God to communicate himself *to the creature*, move him to create the world... But the diffusive disposition that excited God to give creatures existence was rather a communicative disposition in general” (435). In other words, God was moved to create by an intransitive disposition, which is consequently exercised transitively once God has created an objective toward which to be disposed. This subtle distinction preserves God’s self-regard as the supreme end of all God’s works *ad extra*. However, it does not yet answer in what sense God’s consequential ends are really ends in themselves, and how such a claim is consistent with God making himself the end of creation. For such an answer, we must turn to the next section.

**Thesis 4: The intrinsic value of God’s consequent ends is compatible with God making himself his end in creating the world (Ch. I, Sec. III)**

The third and final step in Edwards’ argument is to explain the compatibility of his first two assertions. He makes this intention plain in the opening words of this section: “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 this 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” (436).

***Sub-Thesis A: God’s consequent ends are implied within God making himself his end in creating.***

In order to argue for such compatibility, Edwards first marches through the four consequent ends to show how each is implied within God's own self-regard. "God's regard to himself, and value for his own perfections, should cause him to value these exercises and expressions of his perfections" (437). God's own knowledge and love of himself contains within it a disposition that others know and love him (437). Regarding "God's being disposed to an abundant communication, ... herein also God makes himself his end" (438). Everything can be traced back to a prior disposition in God: "This disposition or desire in God must be prior to the existence of the creature, even in intention and foresight" (438). So, God's ends with regard to creation itself are implied within God making himself his end.

***Sub-Thesis B: God's original and consequent ends share the same object: God himself.***

Without setting aside the priority of God's intransitive disposition to create for his own sake, Edwards takes a further step in unifying God's original and consequent ends. God's self as his end and God's self-communication to creatures are compatible because they share the same object: God himself. God knows, loves and enjoys God; creatures know, love and enjoy God. So God's original self-regard and consequent regard for creatures are teleologically united in God. "[I]n making this [communication of himself] his end, God testifies a supreme respect to himself, and makes himself his end" (443).

***Sub-Thesis C: The union of the elect with God is the material basis for the singularity of God's original and consequent ends.***

The apparently diverse ends of God come to their closest unity when viewed from the perspective of the eternal progressive uniting of the elect with God. Inasmuch as certain creatures are united with God, there is no divide between God's self-regard and

God's regard for creatures. Edwards uses the language of becoming "one with God," "more and more conformed to God," "nearer and nearer to an identity with that which is in God" (443). This process, viewed as a whole, unites the apparently diverse ends of God: "In this view, those elect creatures which must be looked upon as the end of all the rest of creation, considered with respect to the whole of their eternal duration, and as such made God's end, must be view as being, as it were, one with God" (443). The result is that the "interest of the creature is, as it were, God's own interest, in proportion to the degree of their relation and union to God" (443). Therefore, God's end in creation is one. At this point, Edwards has concluded the basic movement of his argument.

**Thesis 5: The concept of union with God protects the gracious character of the act of creating (Ch. I, Sec. IV).**

Although the basic argumentative steps have been made, Edwards continues by defending and elucidating his understanding of God's singular end in creation. The last section in chapter one contains replies to four objections. In a number of these replies, Edwards appeals to the eternal uniting of God and the creature to ward off misunderstandings. For instance, God is not selfish in making himself his end because God's self-regard "inclines him to seek the good of his creature" (452). Again, God cannot be criticized for seeking praise in itself because God is seeking to communicate that which is intrinsically good to the creature: "For a being that loves himself, necessarily loves Love to himself. If holiness in God consists chiefly in love to himself, holiness in the creature must chiefly consist in love to him. And if God loves holiness in himself, he must love it in the creature" (456). Lastly, and most importantly, Edwards



refers to creaturely union with God in order to uphold the gracious character of God's act of creating. "God and the creature, in this affair of the emanation of the divine fullness, are not properly set in opposition; or made the opposite parts of a disjunction. Nor ought God's glory and the creature's good to be spoken of as if they were properly and entirely distinct" (458). God is still gracious to us even as he makes himself his own end: "God in seeking his glory, therein seeks the good of his creatures" (459). This is so because in view of the creature's "greater and greater nearness and strictness of union with [God] ... it appears that God's respect to the creature, in the whole, unites with his respect to himself" (459). So the concept of union with God not only is crucial in arguing for the singularity of God's end in creating, but also is helpful for answering objections concerning the character of God's act of creating.

**Thesis 6: "Glory" is a biblical term than embraces both God's own self-regard and God's regard for creatures (Ch. II, Sec. VI).**

The bulk of chapter two is dedicated to the exegetical elaboration and substantiation of Edwards' argument concerning God's singular creative purpose. The penultimate section in this chapter is particularly important for its focus on the biblical term "glory." Edwards shows how the term "glory" refers both to God's "internal glory" (513) and to God's self-communication of his internal glory (515). According to this dual reference, Edwards unites God's own glory and the grace given to humans:

The glory of God, and the emanations and fruit of his grace in man's salvation, are so spoken of by Christ on this occasion [John 12: 23-32] 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 (520).

So God's glory is found not only in himself but also in his creatures: "the expression of divine grace, in the sanctification and happiness of the redeemed, are especially that glory of his [Christ's], and his Father" (521). So the biblical notion of God's glory expresses the complex singularity of God's end in creating the world.

**Thesis 7: God has one end in creation: the glory of God (Ch. II, Sec. VII)**

In a concluding section, Edwards asserts explicitly that God's end in creation is one. Edwards reiterates what he has said before about the unity of God's self-regard and God's regard for creatures, but with the help of concrete biblical terminology: "Thus we see that the great and last end of God's work 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'" (530). In seeking the externalization of his own internal glory, God "seeks the creature's good; yet therein appears his supreme regard to himself" (531). These two aspects, God's "respect to himself, and to the creature in this matter, are not properly to be looked upon as a double and divided respect of God's heart" (531). Here Edwards once again refers to union with God: "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" (533). Edwards makes it abundantly clear that "there never will be any particular time when it can be said already to have come to such a height" and thus our union with God will "continue thus to move to all eternity" (534). Nevertheless, viewed as whole from God's perspective, this progressive union renders identical God's interest and our interest: "view thus, their interest must be viewed as one with God's interest" (535).

### **Addendum 1: Implications**

Edwards' argument is replete with implications. First, the consequence of a singular end in creation is that the relationship between God and the world is rendered dynamic. By uniting God's self-regard to God's regard for creatures, Edwards understands God's being as intimately involved in creation, yet without undermined God's aseity. As Dr. Lee puts it, "God's own being [is] really and internally involved in human history without compromising God's transcendence and prior actuality."<sup>3</sup> The implication is that "the world matters and is important to God."<sup>4</sup> So Edwards shows us a way to affirm God's radical immanence without setting aside God's transcendence.

Second, Edwards' argument exhibits the compatibility between a world-affirming spirituality and talk of eternity.<sup>5</sup> For Edwards, the meaning of history and hope in the afterlife are not at odds with one another. To take it a step further, on the basis of Edwards' dissertation one could argue for the *necessity* of eternity for a world-affirming spirituality that still upholds the aseity of God. God's self-communication to creation makes creation meaningful for God, but it will take an eternity for God's being to be really communicated to creatures. So eternity keeps the creator-creature distinction in tact while at the same time making all of created history significant. Whether in its modest (compatibility) or bold (necessary relation) form, the systematic unity between a world-affirming spirituality and the hope of eternity is a helpful corrective to the contemporary polarization of these themes. Edwards helps us to say "both/and" and mean it.

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<sup>3</sup> Sang Hyun Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000) p. 241.

<sup>4</sup> Sang Hyun Lee, "God's Relation to the World," in Sang Hyun Lee, ed., *The Princeton Companion to Jonathan Edwards* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005) p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> Lee also points out the implications for a world-affirming spirituality in conversation with H. Richard Niebuhr, *Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, pp. 236-41. The ecological implications of Edwards' philosophy of nature are also discussed, *ibid.*, pp. 263-68.

### **Addendum 2: Questions**

- Is Edwards' primary concern the *singularity* of God's end in creation?
- If so, why is the singularity of God's creative purpose important to Edwards?
- To whom is Edwards responding (cf. e.g., p. 420)?
- Does Edwards adequately reply to the objections he raises (pp. 445-63)?
- What other objections might be raised?
- Are human persons in some sense treated as means rather than ends for Edwards?

### **Addendum 3: Paper Proposal**

I propose to write my final paper on Christ's resurrection in Jonathan Edwards. I am particularly interested in the systematic significance of Christ's eternal embodiment. Edwards indicates that the man Jesus perpetually mediates between God and humans throughout the progressive consummation of creation (*WJE* Vol. 8, Appendix III; Misc. 1263; etc.). My hypothesis is that Christ's bodily resurrection is systematically significant for Edwards because the human nature of Jesus is an indispensable means toward the end for which God created the world. The resurrected flesh of Christ unifies God and creation yet at the same time guarantees the Creator-creature distinction. Thus I aim to show how Christ's resurrection fits within Edwards' larger systematic superstructure. Accordingly, a version of the above exposition of Edwards' dissertation on the end of creation will form a part of this paper. My question for the seminar leader and participants is twofold: (1) Is this a good idea? If so, (2) would an exposition of God's end in creation fit best before or after my treatment of texts concerning Christ's resurrection? In other words, should I move from general to particular or from particular to general?