

JONATHAN EDWARDS ON BEAUTY, DESIRE, AND THE SENSORY WORLD

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[Jonathan Edwards perceived the natural world as a school of desire. He thought that by carefully attending to the sensory splendors (and terrors) of creation, believers learn to apprehend God's glory, which is itself more sensory than anything we can imagine. The human task of bringing the world to a consciousness of its beauty in God is full of ecological implications. As George Marsden says in his new biography of Edwards, "The key to Edwards' thought is that everything is related because everything is related to God."¹]

THE RECENT THREE-HUNDREDTH anniversary of the birth of Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), coming as it does with a huge resurgence in Edwards scholarship, offers an occasion for appreciating more fully the importance of a man who has already been considered the greatest Protestant theologian to grace the American scene.² My article is an effort to relate his writings on spirituality to contemporary discussions of beauty and ecology, asking how his thought can contribute to a Christian environmental ethic. While it is inaccurate to claim him as an ecotheologian, his richly sensual, almost sacramental view of the natural world is full of implications for contemporary moral practice. His work merits attention by Catholics and Protestants alike.

In the early 1960s, well before the first Earth Day celebration and even before the Club of Rome report on the threat of human growth to the natural environment, Joseph Sittler issued one of the first theological calls

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¹ George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University, 2003) 460.

² See Perry Miller, gen. ed., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale University, 1957) Introduction, 2. Henceforth, references to the Yale edition will be referred to as YE followed by the volume number and page reference.

for ecological consciousness. He urged that environmental ethics should take its cue from the first question of the Westminster Catechism in the Calvinist tradition. What is the chief end of man and woman (and of all creation, for that matter)? The answer: To glorify God and to *enjoy* God forever.

The proper starting point for a Christian attentiveness to the ecological crisis, he urged, is the exercise of delight—the enjoyment of all the manifestations of God’s glory in the natural world around us. This is the place to begin, not with paralyzing fear over the potential of ecological catastrophe (as real as that may be) and not with crippling guilt over the human abuse of creation (as dreadful as that is, too), but with enjoyment and delight—the true wellspring of free and spontaneous human action. Drawing on Augustine’s distinction between what we can “use” as human beings and what we should best “enjoy,” Sittler argued that in matters of ecological responsibility “delight is the basis of right use.”³

Jonathan Edwards could not have agreed more. His conviction was that the natural world is a communication of God’s glory that should fill us all with desire. The conscious celebration of the beauty of God is the end toward which the whole of creation is drawn. No other theme is more prevalent in Edwards’s thought. Edward Farley goes so far as to say that in Jonathan Edwards’s work “beauty is more central and more pervasive than in any other text in the history of Christian theology.”⁴

Humans, with their capacity to articulate wonder and to love, have a supremely prominent role in the task of giving God glory, but they do not do it alone. Along with the rest of the natural world, they participate in a reciprocal process of the whole of creation being raised to the consciousness of its created splendor. My theme here focuses on Edwards’s understanding of the new capacity to sense the sweetness of things that believers receive as one of the graces of salvation. This *sensus suavitatis* had been emphasized by Calvin and by the Puritans before him, but Edwards developed it in a new way, viewing it as a perception that illuminated the truths of Scripture and the magnificence of the natural world in a common apprehension of God’s glory.

One of the difficult issues in the interpretation of Edwards’s thought has been how this new “spiritual sense” should be understood. Some have emphasized the idea as offering a virtual “sixth sense” by which the believer is equipped to perceive a spiritual reality altogether unavailable to

³ Joseph Sittler, *The Care of the Earth and Other University Sermons* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964) 88–98.

⁴ Edward Farley, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2001) 43.

nonbelievers. Others have understood it as offering a heightened and more integrated capacity to perceive reality through ordinary channels of sense experience. Michael McClymond rightly urges that both are involved, as Edwards tried to argue for two deeply-held interests—the distinctively Christian experience of God as a graced reality *and* a quality of religious experience that brings ordinary sense experience to its greatest fulfillment.⁵ Edwards continually sought to integrate mind and heart in the apprehension of both God's beauty and the earth's wonder. Divine grace allows us to see the world in all its mystery, and, in turn, the world of the senses trains our perception in glimpsing God's grandeur. This new spiritual sense, then, is a unique, God-given capacity to delight that also incorporates and enhances natural modes of perception.

The most important need we have today in confronting the ecological crisis is to recognize the intimate relationship we already share with the rest of the world around us. Ethical action on behalf of the environment needs to be rooted in the awareness that we are bound together in a highly relational and deeply sensual celebration of God's glory. We are not living human subjects that manipulate a world of lifeless objects. We are all (humans and butterflies and beech trees) created to be luminous sensory beings that mirror directly or indirectly the splendor and beauty of God.

My thesis is this: For Jonathan Edwards, creation functions as a school of desire, training regenerate human beings in the intimate sensory apprehension of God's glory mirrored in the beauty of the world. Humans are to respond, in turn, by articulating that glory, bringing it to full consciousness, and by replicating God's own disposition to communicate beauty as they extend the act of beautifying to the world around them. In other words, the natural world enlarges the human capacity to sense the fullness of God's beauty and the appreciation of that beauty subsequently leads to ethical action. Nature teaches us God's beauty which in turn drives us to its continual replication in time and space. The implications of this for spirituality and the environment are many, suggesting that our purpose as a species is to cooperate with the rest of creation in its mirroring of God's glory. Hence, we dare not hinder that "great work" to which Thomas Berry says we all are called.⁶ Jonathan Edwards was never one hesitant to mention sin, and here he would state boldly: it is a sin to make ugly what God created to reflect and to share God's beauty.

⁵ Michael J. McClymond, "Spiritual Perception in Jonathan Edwards," *Journal of Religion* 77 (April 1997) 214. See also his *Encounters with God: An Approach to the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University, 1998).

⁶ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999).

REPLICATING THE BEAUTY OF THE HOLY TRINITY

The theology of Jonathan Edwards begins and ends with God. It focuses on an extraordinary vision of the divine Beauty replicating itself in the whole of creation. Contrary to the still popular stereotype of Edwards as a preacher of hellfire and damnation, he was far more concerned with God as an absolute beauty to be enjoyed than with God as an absolute power to be feared. He reflected, perhaps even self-critically, after his own infamous Enfield sermon on “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”: “Tis beyond doubt that too much weight has been laid, by many persons of late, on discoveries of God’s greatness, awful majesty, and natural perfection . . . without a real view of the holy, lovely majesty of God.”⁷

The God he sought most to realize, in both his preaching and writing, was a God filled with a restless longing for relationship. What had attracted him most to the beautiful Sarah Pierpont in his years at Yale was her familiarity with God and her extraordinary capacity for delight. He had written in the front page of his Greek grammar, perhaps daydreaming in class one day:

They say there is a young lady in [New Haven] who is beloved of that Great Being, who made and rules the world, and that there are certain seasons in which the Great Being . . . comes to her and fills her mind with exceeding sweet delight, and that she hardly cares for anything except to meditate on him She will sometimes go about from place to place, singing sweetly and seems to be always full of joy and pleasure; and no one knows for what. She loves to be alone, walking in the fields and groves, and seems to have someone invisible always conversing with her.⁸

Like Sarah, Edwards discovered this Great Being not in abstract metaphysics but in the delight he experienced in the sweet communion of nature. He rarely spoke of God’s essence in terms of a divine substance, after the pattern of patristic definitions of “*ousia*” and “*substantia*.”⁹ He preferred to describe God more dynamically as a “disposition” to communicative love.¹⁰ It is truer, he would have said, to think of God as a communicating “act” than as an existing “thing.” God is not so much a self-contained and static entity as an impulsive beauty that delights more than

⁷ *Religious Affections*, YE 2.265.

⁸ “On Sarah Pierpont,” YE 16.789–90.

⁹ In his essay on “The Mind,” Edwards could speak of God as the “substance” of all bodies (see YE 6.344) and in his essay “On Being,” he referred to God as “space,” a kind of incorporeal substance existent in itself (see YE 6.203). Yet these are exceptions that must be understood in light of his more prevalent dynamic thinking.

¹⁰ Sang Hyun Lee argues that Edwards’s dispositional ontology is what “provides the key to the particular character of [his] modernity.” See his *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1988) 4–6.

anything else in sharing itself. Hence, a longing to extend love—a disposition to communicate—forms the dynamic core of the divine being.¹¹ God's essential nature, as it were, is God's will to act out of a longing that needs nothing whatever, but chooses longing itself as an expression of its deepest self-communication.

Edwards argued that God's ravishing beauty is the first and most important thing one can say of God. "God is God, and distinguished from all other beings, and exalted above 'em, chiefly by his divine beauty."¹² To suggest that God enjoys being God is to acknowledge that the divine splendor is a fit subject for its own endless contemplation. Like Sophia in the Wisdom literature, God thoroughly delights in her own loveliness. Understanding the theologian's vocation as a conscientious participation in this delight, Edwards anticipated Balthasar in saying that "[beauty] is what we are more concerned with than anything else."¹³

He was quick to add, however, that the divine beauty is never content with self-absorption, simply terminating in its own mirrored excellence. Its nature is to shine forth, to manifest, and to communicate itself. It is a beauty that insists on being shared. Within the mystery of God's own being as Holy Trinity there is an eternal imaging forth of the Father's perfect beauty in his love of the Son, and (in turn) their mutual delight issuing still further in the fullness of the Holy Spirit. God's disposition as Trinity is endlessly to delight in the shared splendor of that intimate relationship.¹⁴

Hence the Trinity's celebration of a common joy cannot be contained for long within the divine being alone. God spontaneously seeks ever new ways of expressing love and replicating beauty, creating a world that occasions still further opportunities for self-communication and sharing. What is al-

¹¹ Indeed, Edwards can turn the older metaphysics of divine substance on its head, saying that "the *delight* of God is properly substance, yea an infinitely perfect substance, even the essence of God" (*Miscellanies*, no. 94, YE 13.261). Emphasis added.

¹² *Religious Affections*, YE 2.298. Edwards adds that God delights "with true and great pleasure in beholding that beauty which is an image and communication of his own beauty." *Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*, YE 8.446. Hereafter referred to as *End of Creation*.

¹³ "The Mind," no. 1, YE 6.332. On the centrality of beauty in Edwards's theology, see Roland Delattre, *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University, 1968). On the importance of desire in Edwards's thought, see Paula M. Cooney, "Eros and Intimacy in Edwards," *Journal of Religion* 69 (October 1989) 484–501. See also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, ed. Joseph Fessio and John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1983–1991) 7 vols.

¹⁴ Edwards begins his "Essay on the Trinity" by speaking of the infinite happiness that God shares in the enjoyment of himself. See his *Treatise on Grace and Other Posthumously Published Writings*, ed. Paul Helm (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1971) 99–131.

ready complete in God (*ad intra*) nonetheless reaches out (*ad extra*) to extend itself in a continually greater celebration of mutual delight. God is a communicative being whose language is creation, reaching out with a love that is ever restless for more and more sensory expressions of beauty. God's grandeur never tires of being known and relished, and, in the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins: "It will flame out, like shining from shook foil."

For Edwards, this does not imply that God needs to communicate God's self to others in order to complete something lacking in God's own being.¹⁵ God's love, pleasure, and beauty are entirely perfect in themselves, requiring nothing to improve them. As a Reformed theologian, Edwards naturally affirmed the aseity of God—God's freedom to exist without being upheld by another. The Calvinist tradition insists that God would be free and glorious as God even if God had not decided to create the world. God's self-communication, therefore, is a wholly "superfluous" action, in both etymological senses of the term. It is wholly "unnecessary," required by nothing that is not already present in God's own being. And it naturally "overflows" in a vast superfluity from the wellsprings of an inexhaustible source, not unlike Bonaventure's image of the world flowing from the fecundity of God's own being.

In other words, the world's mirroring of the divine beauty does nothing to enlarge the divine nature. In one sense, God's prior and perfect sufficiency remains wholly unchanged. Nonetheless, as God's effulgence is repeated and extended in time and space, the perfection of God seems to become yet more perfect. "If the world had not been created," Edwards suggests, some of "[God's] attributes never would have had any exercise."¹⁶ God's glory would have been less apparent as a result. Self-contained beauty is never as lovely as a beauty in which others take delight. A perfection that elicits rejoicing is always superior to a perfection left to itself alone. Hence, states Edwards, "God looks on the communication of himself, and the emanation of the infinite glory and good that are in himself to belong to the fullness and completeness of himself, as though he were not in his most complete and glorious state without it."¹⁷

Edwards's God is discontent with being beautiful alone. Arrayed in Shekinah glory, exploding all notions of gender and difference, this God longs to be recognized by others, to be part of a mutual celebration that extends beauty and happiness in every possible direction. "God is glorified not only by His glory's being seen, but by its being rejoiced in. When those

¹⁵ "God stands in no need of creatures, and is not profited by them; neither can his happiness be said to be added to by the creature. But yet God has . . . a real delight in his own loveliness, and he also has a real delight in the shining forth or glorifying of it" (*Miscellanies*, no. 679, YE 18.237–38).

¹⁶ *End of Creation*, YE 8.429.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* YE 8.439. See also 432.

that see it delight in it, God is more glorified than if they only see it.” When this happens, Edwards implies, God almost becomes “more” than God had been, as if delight in Being adds something to Being itself. In creating the world and sharing the divine glory with it, God’s happiness is “enlarged,” God’s pleasure made fuller.¹⁸

Edwards also realized that this emphasis on God’s attention to God’s own beauty runs the risk of supposing that “God does everything from a selfish spirit,” as if God were some kind of vain deity—anxiously needing applause, ever hungry for approval.¹⁹ The Northampton preacher wanted to affirm that God “enjoys himself” immensely, finding nothing more captivating than God’s own beauty. But the nature of God’s joy is to remain restless until it completes itself in the delight of others. As Edwards put it, shared “happiness is the end of creation,” the final purpose for which everything is made. “Creation had as good not be, as not rejoice in its being.” Or to express it in another way, “God, in seeking our glory and happiness, [simply] seeks himself.”²⁰

CREATION AS A COMMUNICATION OF GOD’S GLORY

This irrepressible longing ever to extend the contemplation of God’s beauty leads the Divine Being—in every lucid moment—to create a world that shows forth extraordinary wonder. Edwards’s conception of *creatio ex nihilo* was a dynamic one, insisting that God’s task of continually bringing the world into being is, in every moment, an “immediate production out of nothing.”²¹ Everything emerges in each instant as something new, sensuous, and alive, calling attention to itself and what it mirrors of the divine longing. Reacting to the crass materialism of Thomas Hobbes, Edwards wanted to understand the entire world as dependent upon God. Nothing is self-reliant.

God communicates God’s glory most especially in the creation of human beings, those “capable of being proper images of his excellency.” Their spiritual nature is able, by grace, to respond most fully to God’s spiritual beauty. Edwards is unhesitatingly anthropocentric in declaring humans the “willing active subjects [most] capable of actively promoting God’s glory.”²²

¹⁸ *Miscellanies*, no. 448, YE 13.495; and *End of Creation*, YE 8.461.

¹⁹ *Miscellanies*, no. 1151, YE 8.450 n. 2.

²⁰ *Ibid.* no. 3, YE 13.199; *End of Creation*, YE 8.459.

²¹ *Original Sin*, YE 3.402. “It [is] most agreeable to the Scripture to suppose creation to be performed every moment. The Scripture speaks of it as a present, remaining, continual act” (*Miscellanies*, no. 346, YE 13.418).

²² *Miscellanies*, no. 108, YE 13.279; and *Miscellanies*, no. 1218, in *The Philosophy of Jonathan Edwards from His Private Notebooks*, ed. Harvey G. Townsend (Eugene, Oreg.: University of Oregon, 1955) 152. Hereafter referred to as Townsend.

But God also communicates the divine glory through the rest of creation as well. Mountains, streams, and sunlight breaking through morning clouds operate as genuine “images” or “shadows” of God’s restless desire to communicate. Edwards can go so far as to say that even though this is a less direct form of communication, in some respects it may be more reliable. Human beings, despite their spiritual nature, are often—on account of their sin—given to dissemblance. They can pretend to be what they are not. But the rest of nature is free from this artificiality. As Edwards explains, “Though beauty of face and sweet airs in man are not always the effect of the corresponding excellencies of mind, yet the beauties of nature are really emanations, or shadows, of the excellencies of the Son of God.”²³

Hence, natural phenomena are able truly to mirror God’s disposition to pour herself out in reckless displays of beauty.²⁴ Edwards writes that:

when we are delighted with flowery meadows and gentle breezes of wind, we may consider that we only see the emanations of the sweet benevolence of Jesus Christ; when we behold the fragrant rose and lily, we see his love and purity. So the green trees and fields, and singing of birds, are emanations of his infinite joy and benignity; the easiness and naturalness of trees and vines [are] shadows of his infinite beauty and loveliness; the crystal rivers and murmuring streams have the footsteps of his sweet grace and bounty.²⁵

In a brief essay he wrote on the “Beauty of the World,” Edwards observed that “the fields and woods seem to rejoice,” noting “how joyful do the birds seem to be.” Asking how this reflected beauty of God can so readily permeate creation at every angle, he offered an answer from his reading of Newton’s optics.

’Tis very probable that that wonderful suitability of green for the grass and plants, the blue of the sky, the white of the clouds, the colors of flowers, consists in a complicated proportion that these colors make one with another, either in the magnitude of the rays, the number of vibrations that are caused in the optic nerve, or some other way.²⁶

The physical structure of the universe, as he understood it, mirrors and

²³ *Miscellanies*, no. 108, YE 13.279.

²⁴ See John Navone’s comparison of Edwards and Thomas Aquinas in his *Enjoying God’s Beauty* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1999) 99–110.

²⁵ *Miscellanies*, no. 108, YE 13.279. Edwards often used the word “emanation” in speaking of nature as a reflection of God’s glory. He did not mean this in a purely neo-Platonic sense of the universe flowing out of the very essence of God. An emanation, for him, was rather a matter of spiritual significance flowing forth from sensory images that suggest a taste of something larger than themselves. See Mason I. Lowance, “Jonathan Edwards and the Platonists: Edwardsean Epistemology and the Influence of Malebranche and Norris,” *Studies in Puritan American Spirituality* 2 (January, 1992) 129–52.

²⁶ “Beauty of the World,” YE 6.306.

bodies forth the perfect proportions of the divine beauty, striking the human nervous system with a startling awakening of the senses, stirring delight at every turn.

Even in a paper on the scientific study of spiders, Edwards celebrated the delight that spiders take in sailing through the air on wind-borne lengths of web. He saw their behavior as exemplifying “the exuberant goodness of the Creator in providing for the pleasure and recreation of all sorts of creatures, even the insects.”²⁷ Evidences of delight in nature are but a mirror of God’s own pleasure in all that God has made. For Edwards, the universe is an explosion of God’s glory.²⁸

But what for him was an obvious reality written across the cosmos, was not so apparent to others walking through an 18th-century New England meadow surrounded by red maples in the fall. Edwards had to answer the question about how nature could serve as a reliable school of desire for some—leading them to God’s beauty in Christ, while to others it remains opaque and indifferent. His way of explaining this difference in perception was to posit the notion of a new spiritual sense given to believers by the Spirit of God at their conversion.

Having laid the foundation of Edwards’s theology of creation in his conception of God’s communicative beauty, my concern now is to turn to the role that the natural world plays in teaching believers to “sense” the fullness of God’s grandeur. Subsequently, I ask about the role that human beings play in the task of replicating God’s beauty, bringing it to still greater fullness in their own ethical responsibility, their own act of beautifying what has yet to be brought into the service of God’s glory.

COMING TO A “SENSORY” KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

For Edwards, like Calvin and the Puritans before him, nature functions as a school of desire, teaching humans how to perceive God’s glory. The physical world, when appreciated with the new spiritual sense that regeneration brings, gives us direct training in the multidimensional way of knowing that is necessary for meeting God. This is a knowing that involves a tasting and delighting—not just an apprehension of the mind, but an intimate engagement of all the senses as well.

As an heir of John Locke, Edwards put a twist on the way people in the 18th century ordinarily spoke of knowing God in relationship to how they knew the world around them. Most were accustomed to distinguishing between their knowledge of the physical world (by sensation) and their knowledge of an ethereal, non-sensory God (by faith and reason). Edwards

²⁷ “The Spider Letter” [October 31, 1723], in YE 6.163–169.

²⁸ Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* 463.

argued, however, that God in the mystery of God's own being is far more "sensuous"—more full of infinite delights, more prone to the endless expansion of relationships, more astonishingly beautiful—than anything we can imagine in this stunningly sensuous world around us. In effect, he said, if you think *this* world is sensual and beautiful, you haven't seen anything yet! All this is but a dim, quasi-sensual reflection of God's still greater glory, overflowing spontaneously from the mystery of God's inner-trinitarian life. That is where all desire and all connectedness find their birth.

Yet this sensory world, in all of its partial, secondary beauty, available to us through the exercise of our senses, trains us in the polymorphous way of knowing that is required for encountering a super-sensory God of matchless glory. As Edwards put it, "The works of God are . . . a kind of voice or language of God to *instruct* intelligent beings in things pertaining to Himself."²⁹

One must be careful, of course, in speaking of God as a "sensuous" being. We have seen already that the core of God's being, for Edwards, is not primarily a divine "substance," certainly not anything available to sensory analysis. Yet the mutual delight that is shared within the exchange of the Trinity is something best suggested to us by a sensory analogy. If God's essence is a "disposition" to multiply the enjoyment of beauty, to reach out from Father to Son, and to Spirit, and subsequently to the whole of creation in a celebration of interconnected delight, then "one alone cannot be excellent."³⁰ God is ontologically hungry for relationship. Hence, the intimate interrelatedness of all things grows out of this divine propensity (God's own insatiable longing) for interconnectedness. Edwards, therefore, does not think of God as a "sensual being." Rather God is what gives sensuality its meaning. Nothing is more truly "sensuous" than the delight in harmony, beauty, and connectedness that lies at the core of the Holy Trinity.

Accordingly, if one seeks to practice the kind of knowing that is necessary for encountering such a God, one can look to nature as a school of desire in teaching us how to delight, how to savor and taste, how to desire the beauty to which it points. As our senses open us to harmonies of sound and delicacies of scent, as they teach us to delight in the play of light in a bubbling fountain of water, they offer a spiritual training in the knowledge of God. Edwards never tired of pointing out that to "know" God is also to enjoy God. The properly-trained mind not only "speculates and beholds, but relishes and feels."³¹

In speaking of nature as a school of desire, Edwards was drawing on a

²⁹ *Images of Divine Things*, no. 57, YE 11.67. Emphasis added.

³⁰ "The Mind," no. 1, YE 6.337.

³¹ *Religious Affections*, YE 2.272.

long tradition of the “colloquy with the creatures.” This literary trope goes back to Job’s injunction (Job 12:7) to “Ask the beasts, and they will teach you,” and to Jesus’ call to consider the lilies of the field (in Matthew 6:28). The form became stylized in Augustine’s *Confessions* when he “puts his questions to the earth,” asking the creatures, the winds, and the sky to “tell him of God.”³² Their answer is that their beauty leads him to a Beauty beyond themselves in God. The pattern was later carried on by Bonaventure and the Victorines in the Middle Ages and given expression again by John Calvin in his commentaries on the psalms. The Puritan tradition would extend it still further through Richard Baxter, the poetry of Edward Taylor, and the seventh book of *Paradise Lost*. Puritan “meditations on the creatures” became an instructive device in learning how the senses of the body lead us by delight to the contemplation of God.

When Puritan horticulturist Ralph Austin imagined an extended dialogue between a husbandman and his fruit trees, he was drawing on this time-honored motif. As he explained: “When we seriously consider the nature, and properties of inanimate creatures; then we aske Questions of them; and they being thus Questioned, they return an answer unto men, when we clearly perceive that their wonderfull Natures, vertues, and properties, cannot be, but from the Power, and Wisdome of a superior Cause.”³³ Thomas Adam, esteemed as the “Shakespeare of the English Puritans” because of his exquisite use of language, similarly published a series of sermons on spiritual lessons to be learned from the herbs of an English garden, clarifying their various medicinal and devotional uses. These were writers who continued Bonaventure’s desire to read the vestiges of God from the wonders of creation, who echoed Francis de Sales’s insistence that colloquies (or “familiar talk”) with “insensible creatures” can be instructive to the faithful.³⁴ The Calvinist usage from which Edwards drew was but one strain of a much wider Augustinian tradition.

In describing Edwards’s own conception of nature as a school of desire, one has to admit that it is not always easy to characterize his understanding of the natural world. A reading of this 18th-century theologian, especially as viewed by his modern interpreters, would seem to suggest that there were two very different Jonathan Edwardses, responding in diametrically

³² Augustine, *Confessions* X.9.

³³ Ralph Austin, *Dialogue betweene the Husbandman and Fruit-Trees* (Oxford: Thomas Bowman, 1676) quoted in Kitty W. Scoular, *Natural Magic: Studies in the Presentation of Nature in English Poetry from Spenser to Marvell* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965) 20 n.1.

³⁴ Thomas Adam, *A Divine Herball, Together with a Forrest of Thornes* (London: George Purslowe, 1616); Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* 2.1–13; and Francis de Sales, *An Introduction to a Devoute Life*, trans. John Yakesley (Rouen: Cardin Hamillon, 1614) 139.

opposite ways to the Western Massachusetts landscape of which he was a part. There was Edwards the empiricist and Edwards the idealist. The careful observer of the natural world, avidly reading Locke and Newton, penning half a volume of scientific writings, finding God in the intricate beauty of the earth, this Edwards seems to stand in stark contrast to the philosopher of neo-Platonic sympathies who viewed all objects of perception as no more than ideas of the perceiving mind, who spoke of the world as “less than nothing” from the perspective of eternity.³⁵ Edwards as empiricist honored the world as a reliable and independent image of God’s glory. Edwards as idealist recognized the world as upheld by the power of God alone.³⁶

These two dimensions of Edwards’s thought come together most clearly in his emphasis on desiring God—delighting in God’s own delight in beauty and interrelatedness. The human heart and the rest of the created world share this in common. Both are shot through with a longing for intimate relationship. Both participate in the attractiveness that holds all reality together. Words like pleasure and delight, relish and appetite, ravishment and enjoyment continually recur in Edwards’s writings, like Calvin and the Puritans before him. In a sermon on “Youth and the Pleasures of Piety,” he scorned those who look down on “religion as a very dull, melancholy thing,” arguing that far from hindering the “pleasure of outward enjoyments,” the spiritual life actually promotes it. He referred to the highest pleasures of the soul and the highest pleasures of the sensory world in complementary ways. Edwards knew that the human person is “so unsatiable [for God] that nothing can be found in the world [that] will satisfy him.”³⁷ Yet the earth serves to whet an appetite it cannot fulfill. For those with an imagination awakened by the new sense, it teaches a savoring and tasting that is the deepest way of knowing God we are capable of having.

This explains why Edwards, even as a child, built huts for prayer in the woods of his father’s Connecticut farm. Throughout his life, his ideas flowed best as he rode his horse or walked through the New England

³⁵ See Clyde A. Holbrook, *Jonathan Edwards, the Valley and Nature: an Interpretative Essay* (Lewisburg, Penn.: Bucknell University, 1987) 71–72, 88–93; Sang Hyun Lee, “Edwards on God and Nature: Resources for Contemporary Theology,” in *Edwards in Our Time: Jonathan Edwards and the Shaping of American Religion*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee and Allen C. Guelzo (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 15–44; and Paula M. Coe, *Jonathan Edwards on Nature and Destiny: A Systematic Analysis* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1985) 13–64.

³⁶ See Avihu Zakai, “Jonathan Edwards and the Language of Nature: The Re-Enchantment of the World in the Age of Scientific Reasoning,” *Journal of Religious History* 26 (February 2002) 15–41.

³⁷ Sermon on “Youth and the Pleasures of Piety” (1734), YE 19.89, 85; and Sermon on “Nothing upon Earth Can Represent the Glories of Heaven” (1724), YE 14.152.

countryside, recording thoughts on bits of paper that he pinned to his waistcoat. On late August evenings he would lie on his back near the river, watching butterflies and moths flying toward the southeast. He loved to imagine himself “being alone in the mountains, or some solitary wilderness, far from all mankind, sweetly conversing with Christ, and wrapt and swallowed up in God.”³⁸ The physical world never ceased to operate for him as a school of desire.

Like earlier Puritans before him, Edwards carried on the classical and medieval metaphor of nature as a “second book,” another source—along with Scripture—for knowing God.³⁹ Neither he nor the Puritans saw this as a basis for establishing as such a “natural theology.” The created world does not offer us any new content, beyond what we already have in the “first book” of Scripture. But, as it were, it does offer us an important exercise in epistemology. It gives us practice in a way of knowing that is far deeper and richer than the abstract speculation we usually exercise in understanding what we read.⁴⁰

THE SENSORY WORLD AND THE SENSE OF THE HEART

The key to understanding the importance that Edwards attributed to the sensory world is found in his emphasis on the “new sense” that believers receive as part of the revivifying work of salvation. This “sense of the heart” draws on the sensorial specificity of the natural world in training the faithful for the affective receptivity that knowing God requires. It gives life to the analogical imagination, using beauty as a way of leading the soul to God. We can identify five different aspects of this new esthetic sense that Edwards employed in giving expression to a spirituality of desire.

Basic to his understanding the operation of the new sense is his notion of a “sensible idea.” This is the means by which we are able even to begin the task of knowing God. God can never be fully known as an object of

³⁸ “Personal Narrative,” YE 16.791–93.

³⁹ Edwards argued, “As the system of nature and the system of revelation are both divine works, so both are in different senses a divine word, both are the voice of God to intelligent creatures, a manifestation and declaration of Himself to mankind” (*Miscellanies*, no. 1340, Townsend, 233).

⁴⁰ Nathanael Culverwel, a 17th-century Puritan divine and one of the Cambridge Platonists who influenced Edwards’s thought, spoke of the limits of what we can know of God from the observations of the natural world. The book of creation offers but a shadow of the Spouse’s beauty, he argued. “This way of beholding him breeds rather admiration than begets knowledge . . . and admiration is at best but *semen scientia*. . . This rather sets the soul a longing, than gives it any true satisfaction.” See Nathanael Culverwell, *Spiritual Opticks: Or a Glasse, Discovering the Weaknesse and Imperfection of a Christian’s Knowledge in this Life* (Oxford: H. Hall, 1668) 182.

intellection, he argued, but must be loved through a visceral and participatory way of knowing. Edwards insisted that it is the impassioned mind, the loving mind, the mind made open to all of its senses that thinks most clearly.

He was indebted here to John Smith and other Cambridge Platonists in the 17th century who had contrasted the “thin, airy knowledge that is got by meer speculation” with the “sweetness and deliciousness of divine truth” that has to be “tasted and relished” in order to be taken in. That happens when the regenerate soul is renewed by God’s Spirit. “Reason is turned into sense.” One receives a new capacity to embrace a “sensible idea”—to experience spiritual realities with all the vividness of a sense impression, whether visual, auditory, palatal, tactile, or olfactory.⁴¹

The regenerate person, for example, does not just “think” the idea of God’s radiance as an exercise of the brain in rational understanding. The wholeness of the renewed person receives the idea as a “sensation” awakening desire and delight.⁴² Edwards described the spiritually enlightened individual’s sense of God’s excellency in this way:

He does not merely rationally believe that God is glorious, but he has a sense of the gloriousness of God in his heart. There is not only a rational belief that God is holy, and that holiness is a good thing, but there is a sense of the loveliness of God’s holiness. There is not only a speculatively judging that God is gracious, but a sense how amiable God is upon that account, or a sense of the beauty of this divine attribute.⁴³

One perceives the idea of God’s glory with the same sort of indisputable immediacy as one glimpses sunlight passing through falling water. In Edwards’s understanding, the mind is a sense organ, a mechanism of knowing that “feels ideas,” that “senses concepts,” that grasps with a totality of wonder what the unregenerate mind perceives (if at all) only as an abstraction.⁴⁴

God is more “sensuous,” more compelling, more engaging and alive than any parallel one can point to in all the luscious green splendor of earth. And yet it is the physical world that opens one’s senses, that actively participates itself in the process of replicating God’s glory in time and space.⁴⁵ Edwards points to “an analogy, or consent, between the beauty of the skies, trees, fields, flowers, etc. and spiritual excellencies,” even though

⁴¹ John Smith, *Select Discourses* (London: F. Flesher, 1660) 4, 9, 16.

⁴² *Miscellanies*, no. 489, YE 13.533.

⁴³ Sermon on “A Divine and Supernatural Light” (1733), YE 17.413.

⁴⁴ “The Mind,” no. 16, YE 6.345.

⁴⁵ See Sang Hyun Lee, “Jonathan Edwards on Nature,” in *Faithful Imagining: Essays in Honor of Richard R. Niebuhr*, ed. Albert Blackwell, Sang Hyun Lee, and Wayne Proudfoot (Atlanta: Scholars, 1995) 39–59.

he admits this connection is generally “more hid and requires a more discerning, *feeling mind* to perceive it.” But if one exercises that “feeling mind,” one suddenly discerns a “love and [delight] in flowers and be-spangled meadows.” One perceives “a rejoicing in the green trees and fields, [and] majesty in thunder.” Through this new sense we recognize inanimate creatures—sharing in the same sensory world of God’s making—as participating in a joint apprehension of God’s beauty.⁴⁶

THE *SENSUS SUAVITATIS*

A second aspect of Edwards’s conception of the “new sense” is his conviction that this way of knowing comes only as a spiritual gift, offered by God as something more than simply the exercise of the other five senses. Its source is God’s grace alone. While Edwards knew that God’s ravishing beauty is the most important thing to be said of God, and that the natural world witnesses to this at every hand, he was also aware that the capacity to recognize God’s glory is not immediately available to every man and woman. Sin has distorted the full sensory apparatus of the human person. Responding to God’s self-communication in nature, therefore, requires the exercise of a particular sense of the heart, something received in the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit.

Edwards developed this teaching out of the earlier Calvinist tradition, recasting it in terms of Locke’s emphasis on sensory experience and his own encounter of the Great Awakening.⁴⁷ John Calvin had spoken of a capacity for discerning the “sweetness “ (*suavitas*) of spiritual things that becomes part of the believer’s way of grasping divine truth. As Calvin had put it: “man’s understanding, thus beamed by the light of the Holy Spirit, then at last truly begins to taste [*gustare incipit*] those things which belong to the Kingdom of God, having formerly been quite foolish and dull in tasting them.”⁴⁸

As early as the spring of 1721, about the time of Edwards’s own conversion, he began to speak of “a new sense of things,” an “inward, sweet delight” that came to him from his walks in the woods of his father’s farm, his reading of the Canticle, and his contemplation of God. In the midst of the Northampton revival in 1734, he went on to develop the notion of the sense of the heart as what allows the believer to go beyond an intellectual comprehension of God’s glory to a sensual appreciation of its beauty. It is the difference, he would say, between rationally knowing that honey is

⁴⁶ *Miscellanies*, no. 108, YE 13.278–79. Emphasis added.

⁴⁷ See Terrence Erdt, *Jonathan Edwards, Art, and the Sense of the Heart* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts, 1980) 2–23.

⁴⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes* III.2.34.

sweet, and being able vividly to taste its sweetness. A dozen years later, in his treatise on the *Religious Affections*, he would make this new esthetic sense one of the indicators of an authentic religious experience.⁴⁹

What most distinguished the experience of those in the revival, he said, was not a dramatic display of religious feeling, but a new sensitivity to the world—an ability to discern beauty where it had not been apparent before. Edwards said of the people in Northampton after the awakening: “The light and comfort which some of them enjoy, gives a new relish to their common blessings, and causes all things about ’em to appear as it were beautiful, sweet and pleasant to them: all things abroad, the sun, moon and stars, the clouds and sky, the heavens and earth, appear as it were with a cast of divine glory and sweetness upon them.”⁵⁰

This acquisition of an increased “spiritual appetite” was also something that Edwards understood to be sustained through communion with Christ in the mystery of the Lord’s Supper. While he mixed Zwinglian and Calvinist elements in his eucharistic theology, he nonetheless emphasized that believers become “partakers of the divine nature” in receiving Christ through the sacrament. It causes “the soul to grow as food does the body,” satisfying (and increasing) the appetite God had aroused. This emphasis led to his disagreeing with his grandfather Solomon Stoddard over the question of open communion and ultimately to his dismissal from the Northampton church in 1749. For him, the Eucharist was not just another means (like preaching) for converting the ungodly. It was a means of intimately binding believers in union with Christ, feeding their new sensory appetite for holy things.⁵¹

A JUXTAPOSITION OF SENSORY MODES

A third dimension of Edwards’s conception of this new spiritual sense was its necessary mixing of sensory modes in the exuberant effort to describe God’s glory. All human beings seem to have a preferred sensory channel that predominates in the way one perceives and describes reality. It reveals itself subtly in the sensory metaphors of one’s language. For Edwards, like most people in the Enlightenment, it was *seeing* (and secondarily, hearing) that best conveyed the authenticity of what truly mat-

⁴⁹ “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” YE 17.414; and *Religious Affections*, YE 2.30–33, 270–83.

⁵⁰ “A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God” (1737), YE 4.151, 174–75, 183.

⁵¹ Sermon on 1 Cor. 1:9 (before 1733) and Sermon on Luke 14:16 (before 1733), as cited in William J. Danaher, “By Sensible Signs Represented: Jonathan Edwards’ Sermons on the Lord’s Supper,” *Pro Ecclesia* 7 (Summer, 1998) 261–87.

tered.⁵² Spiritual vision was central to his perception of truth, even though he thought music was the most beautiful and perfect way of expressing glory. He once described the new spiritual sense given to the Christian as a “rectified musical ear.”⁵³

But generally in talking about the new spiritual sense, he chose *taste* as the best way to characterize it, as Calvin and the Puritans had also done before him. He knew that taste and flavor suggest “the immediate presence of a thing to the human palate.”⁵⁴ In the other senses (like hearing, smelling, and seeing) there is a separating medium of air through which awareness is transferred, but not so with tasting. “Taste is an intimate sense,” says Diane Ackerman. “We can’t taste things at a distance.”⁵⁵ Edwards’s own exercise of a sense of taste was fairly moderate, due to his poor health and simplicity of life. He often preferred a supper of bread and milk. But he and his wife Sarah had a craving for chocolate that he would satisfy with packages brought back from his trips to Boston. The whole family delighted in its taste.

Throughout Edwards’s writings, in all the imaginative analogies he employed, he drew on a wide range of the human sensorium. Auditory, visual, and kinesthetic metaphors recur constantly. After his conversion, for example, God’s glory struck him most profoundly through the sound of thunder, the bright flash of lightning, and the charged atmosphere into which he loved to run at the coming of a storm. These had been the very things that had frightened him most before his conversion. In his hand-sewn notebooks, full of reflections on “Images of Divine Things” gathered from his observations in the Connecticut River Valley, he wrote of song birds, flowing water, and the intricate movement of stars. He spoke of *seeing* these things, strangely enough, as the *voice* of God, *glimpsing* what is *held* out to us by the divine hand.⁵⁶ This is a muddled language, as if spoken words could be perceived by the eye or images of the mind touched by one’s hand. Clyde Holbrook has criticized Edwards’s mixing of sensory metaphors, seeing it as something that “jars the literary symmetry” of his writing.⁵⁷ But he misses the deeper concern that underlies Edwards’s use of language

⁵² Edwards said in his 1724 sermon on “Nothing upon Earth Can Represent the Glories of Heaven”: “Now nothing is so pleasing naturally to the sight as light, and nothing that is the object of our senses that is so glorious” (YE 14.142).

⁵³ *Miscellanies*, no. 141, YE 13.297–98.

⁵⁴ Miklos Veto, “Spiritual Knowledge according to Jonathan Edwards,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 31 (April 1996) 171.

⁵⁵ Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (New York: Random House, 1990) 128.

⁵⁶ *Images of Divine Things*, no. 70, YE 11.74. Emphasis added.

⁵⁷ Clyde Holbrook, *Jonathan Edwards, the Valley and Nature* 81.

here. Sensory imagery has to be recklessly multiplied if one hopes even to begin adequately to express the glory of God.

His wife Sarah similarly juxtaposed images of flowing water and dancing sunlight as she reflected on her own vivid religious experience of January 28, 1742. Her language shares in the same ambiguity one might find in a late-20th-century physicist alternating between wave and particle images of light. Language, she knew, has to be twisted if it is to suggest a reality beyond normal human perception. This is how she recalled the experience: “[T]here seemed to be a constant *flowing* and reflowing of heavenly and divine love, from Christ’s heart to mine; and I appeared to myself to float or swim, in these bright, sweet *beams* of the love of Christ, like the *notes* swimming in the beams of the sun, or the *streams of light* which come in at the window.”⁵⁸ Edwards and his wife found the reality of God’s presence most apparent at moments of sensory overload, when one perceives in this world a brief harmony of glimpses, sounds, tastes, scents, and tactile impressions.

This juxtaposition of sensory modes in Edwards’s cognitive processing is similar to what psychologists might associate with the phenomenon of synesthesia. As an experience of “joint perception” (Gk. *syn-aesthesia*), this is a neurological condition where stimuli to one sense mode produces sensations in one or more additional modes. Certain individuals, for instance, can speak of “hearing colors” or “seeing sounds.”⁵⁹ They associate numbers with particular scents or recognize musical notes as bearing distinct shades of color. While this may or may not have been the case neurologically for Edwards, his language is filled with overlapping sensory imagery of this sort.⁶⁰ In speaking of the nature of the Trinity or the mystery of God’s glory, he often juxtaposed images of sight and touch, picturing God simultaneously as light and water, “sun” and “fountain.”⁶¹ As if the optimal image for contemplating God were “flowing light” or “resounding touch,” a noisy, splashing waterfall through which the sun shines, making each drop of water a prism for reflecting still greater light.

⁵⁸ *The Works of President Edwards, with a Memoir by Sereno E. Dwight*, ed. Edward Hickman (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974; orig. ed. 1834) vol. I, lxxv. Emphasis added.

⁵⁹ See Kevin T. Dann, *Bright Colors Falsely Seen: Synaesthesia and the Search for Transcendent Knowledge* (New Haven: Yale University, 1998).

⁶⁰ There are similarities between Edwards and Bernard of Clairvaux in this regard. Bernard McGinn observes that “Bernard’s employment of the spiritual senses as modes of understanding the experience of the divine presence tends to be synaesthetic in nature, appealing to a wide range of sense images and sometimes deliberately mingling diverse sensory perceptions” (*The Growth of Mysticism*, Vol. 2 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* [New York: Crossroad, 1994] 187).

⁶¹ See *End of Creation*, YE 8.530–31 and “Essay on the Trinity,” 125–26.

In short, multidimensional sensory awareness was crucial to Edwards's understanding of the nature of spiritual knowing.

THE SENSORY PERCEPTION OF TYPES IN NATURE

Yet another aspect of Edwards's conception of the role that nature plays in the exercise of the new sense has to do with his understanding of typology. This was how he conceived the world of created things as actively "participating" in the beauty to which it points. Earlier Puritan practice had often drawn on "types" from the natural world to substantiate particular claims of Scripture. Cotton Mather, for example, had written widely on meteorological matters—from thunder (in his *Brontologia sacra*) to storms at sea. But his practice, like others, had always been to move as quickly as possible from the natural phenomenon to the truth it allegorically represented. Edwards, by contrast, was able to linger with the text of nature itself because of the greater attentiveness that the "new sense" made possible. Nature, for him, never led simply to a reality wholly beyond itself. It participated in the very mystery it represented.⁶²

Hence, he clearly affirmed the natural world as *itself* a communication of God's majesty, one that intimately joins with humans in achieving its own goal in God's end for creation. Flowing rivers such as the Connecticut and Housatonic serve as more than mere stage settings for God's drama, focused exclusively on human life. They are more than empty "significations" of holy things in which they never participate—allegorical hints of the rivers of paradise, for example.⁶³ For Edwards, their splashing movement, the way their waters reflect light, the play of sun and shadows along their banks offer a direct apprehension of God's glory and majesty. They communicate this by themselves as representative "images and shadows" that require the participation of human perception in bringing them to the completion of their divine purpose. Similarly, the attraction of gravity, the delight of bees in the sweet taste of pollen, the relish and appetite of babies for breast milk, the intimate union of a branch grafted onto a fruit tree, the sexual appeal of a wife to her husband—all these serve, he proclaimed, as teachers of desire drawing us to God.⁶⁴

⁶² See Mason I. Lowance, Jr., "'Images or Shadows of Divine Things' in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards," in *Typology and Early American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1972) 235–38; and Janice Knight, "Learning the Language of God: Jonathan Edwards and the Typology of Nature," *William and Mary Quarterly* third series 48:4 (October 1991) 531–51.

⁶³ See Conrad Cherry, *Nature and the Religious Imagination: From Edwards to Bushnell* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 31.

⁶⁴ *Images of Divine Things*, YE 11.81, 124, 93, 109, 59. Perry Miller said that

The nature imagery that Edwards found most persuasive—most able to trigger an experience of God’s glory (with all the spiritual sensuality that involves)—were images that powerfully suggest a sense of reciprocal interaction. He exulted in images of effulgence and refulgence, the gleaming forth of light and its being reflected back again, as in play of moonlight on the surface of a river. Dynamic images that highlight the relationships between bodies were the ones that intrigued him most. As he expressed it with poetic splendor: “In the creature’s knowing, esteeming, loving, rejoicing in, and praising God, the glory of God is both exhibited and acknowledged; his fullness is received and returned. Here is both an *emanation* and *remanation*. The refulgence shines upon and into the creature, and is reflected back to the luminary.”⁶⁵

This keen observer of the landscapes of desire in 18th-century New England knew that human language itself is deeply rooted in the sensory world. The only communication skills available to us are derived from our human experience of embodiment. This alone is what serves us in speaking of God. Nothing is more suited for analogically suggesting the “supersensory” reality of God, Edwards thought, than the concrete specificity of human language and the physical world out of which it arises. In describing the genesis of language, he explained that: “the names of spiritual things, or most of them, [are] derived from the names of sensible or corporeal ones . . . because there was no other way of making others readily understand men’s meaning when they first signified these things by sounds, than by giving of them the names of things sensible to which they had an analogy.”⁶⁶

He would have recognized generative words like “companion” and “supercilious,” for example, as having their source in the bodily experience of eating bread with another or raising one’s eyebrows in haughty arrogance. Anticipating Emerson’s intimate dependence of human language on the physical world, Edwards knew that the human being—like God—is necessarily a communicative being whose language is creation, ambiguous and accommodated as that always is.

THE NEW SENSE AND THE BEAUTY OF THE CROSS

A fifth and final aspect of Edwards’s understanding of the sense of the heart as it relates to the natural world has to do with the role that nature

Edwards, in this work, offered “nothing less than an assertion of the absolute validity of the sensuous” (*Images or Shadows of Divine Things by Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Perry Miller [New Haven: Yale University, 1948] 36).

⁶⁵ *End of Creation*, YE 8.531.

⁶⁶ “The Mind,” no. 23, YE 6.349.

plays even in teaching us the way of the cross. The whole creation, in its groaning and travail as it awaits the promised glory, models the frustration of holy desire that human sinfulness has brought into the world. The earth suffers continually at the hands of human abuse. Edwards seems almost to speak with an ecological sensitivity in deploring the “abusive improvement that man, who has the dominion over the creatures, puts the creatures to.” He scorns this misuse as “a force upon the creature; for the creature is abused in it, perverted to far meaner purposes than those for which the author of its nature made it.”⁶⁷ He grieves over humans killing brute creatures by the “thousands and millions” every day, making the earth a “meat shop of sin.”⁶⁸

However, one must resist stylizing Jonathan Edwards as a proto-enviroteologist. While his thinking may be full of ecological implications when read from a contemporary perspective, he had no intention of providing an environmental ethic aimed at protecting the natural world. His concern was more with the tragedy of human sin than the destruction of the environment. In an unpublished 1737 sermon on Romans 8:22, Edwards lamented the extent to which the created world is “debased below its nature” by human pollution. “No wonder the whole creation is represented as groaning [*sic*] under such an abuse & in being held under such bondage,” he exclaimed. He not only decried the number of animals that humans daily destroy “to satiate their vicious appetites,” but warned that if dominion-sated human beings (the “cumberers of the ground”) continue in their sin “the creation will surely spew you out . . . The world will disburden it self of you & and you shall be cast forth as an abominable branch.”⁶⁹

He knew that God’s most astonishing beauty lies hidden in the earth’s suffering, because the anguish of nature points also to the agony of the cross. For Edwards, the highest expression of God’s glory revealed in creation is witnessed in the God-become-Creature who died on Golgotha. In the humiliation of Christ we find the greatest consent of the creation to its Maker. The Creator becomes in this moment the lowest of all creatures on earth. The power of consent, the unity of being, the persuasiveness of the senses, the centrality of embodiment to the apprehension of God’s glory—all these are discovered here at the cross.

⁶⁷ “An Humble Attempt,” YE 5.345. In a 1731 sermon titled “East of Eden,” Edwards said of the earth that God had put his own beauty upon it; it shone with the communication of his glory.” But as a result of human sin, “the earth lost its beauty and pleasantness . . . That bloom and beauty and joy that all nature seemed to [be] clothed with was gone” (YE 17.334).

⁶⁸ Unpublished manuscript sermon on Romans 8:22, “The whole creation does as it were groan under the sins of wicked man” (1737), Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, 17.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 17, 25, 29.

Edwards echoed Calvin and Augustine before him (anticipating Balthasar after him) in affirming that God is beautiful, not only in the loveliness of the earth, but even “beautiful on the cross.”⁷⁰ Obviously it is a long stretch, by any reach of the imagination, to discern beauty in the midst of pain. But once again it is the “new sense” imparted by God’s spirit that makes this discernment possible. The new capacity for perceiving God’s beauty makes one simultaneously more sensitive to deformity, more attentive to the distorting of God’s mirrored loveliness. It breeds a resistance to the disfiguring of the world’s beauty as well as an identification with that which is most disfigured.

Beauty requires this, for it is the nature of God’s beauty never to be static. God continually reaches out to beautify, to embrace in love, to reclaim what is lost. In the strange beauty of the cross, we perceive the extent to which God goes in assuming the full brokenness of creation. Here we grasp most dramatically God’s disposition to communicate with reckless longing. Edwards found Christ’s highest beauty in “the greatest degree of his humiliation.” “Never [more than at the cross] was his divine glory and majesty covered with so thick and dark a veil . . . yet never was his divine glory so manifested by any act of his, as in that act of yielding himself up to these sufferings.”⁷¹ Here, in the agony of the cross, the exquisite beauty of the Holy Trinity is finally discerned most perfectly—at least to eyes made able to see. Through the gift of the *sensus suavitatis* one is able to know, even in the midst of apparent despair, that the world in the end is saved by beauty. Long before Dostoyevsky and Berdyaev, Edwards recognized this truth.

But he went on to argue that understanding beauty in this way requires the acceptance of an ethical imperative that comes along with it. The beauty of the cross demands not only an intellectual comprehension of radical abandonment, but a practice of it in one’s own Christian experience. This is what imitators of a triune God have to risk for the sake of love. “True happiness, the crown of glory, is to be come at in no other way than by bearing Christ’s cross, by a life of mortification, self-denial and labor.” The new sense is brought to full exercise only as it expresses itself finally in a life of concrete, sensory identification with those who suffer.⁷² The surest test of an authentic work of the Spirit, Edwards urged, is an eager-

⁷⁰ See Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1992) 97–139. Hans Urs von Balthasar similarly points “through the ghastliness of the crucified, the seeming absence of all beauty [to] the breakthrough of the flaming mystery of the glory of love: *fulget crucis mysterium*” (“Earthly Beauty and Divine Glory,” *Communio* 10 [Fall 1983] 206).

⁷¹ Sermon on “The Excellency of Christ” (1736), YE 19.576.

⁷² *Images of Divine Things*, no. 3, YE 11:52.

ness to reclaim the hidden beauty of those who remain unloved. Necessarily, he said, "Grace tends to holy practice."⁷³

DELIGHTING IN BEAUTY AND BESTOWING IT

My concluding concern here is to identify more specifically the human responsibilities that derive from this distinctive esthetic awareness made possible by the new sense. If, as Edwards argues, God's deepest inclination or disposition is to communicate beauty for the sake of love, and if we as humans are prime recipients of that beauty in the mystery of the cross, then how do we extend the act of beautifying to the rest of the creation around us? How do we continue to replicate God's glory in time and space? What particular shape should it take in human speech and action?

For Jonathan Edwards, esthetic sensitivity must always reach out to something beyond itself. Glory is instinctively communicative. Frank Burch Brown says that for all Augustinians, "the greater the art's beauty, the greater the sense of yearning that it evokes."⁷⁴ It inevitably makes one hungry for more than it is able to satisfy. Beauty never ends in itself, therefore. There is no "art for art's sake." Esthetics and ethics are necessarily joined. Hence, even as God's own beauty is inherently disposed to the beautifying of others, so the new sense in Edwards must lead to the adorning work of love exercised as justice.

Near the end of his life, as a missionary to the Housatonic Indians in Western Massachusetts, Edwards wrote a pair of exquisite dissertations on the nature of beauty and its impact on the human soul. His *Dissertation Concerning the End for which God Created the World* focused on the magnificence of God's reflected beauty in creation and his *Dissertation on the Nature of True Virtue* attended to the ethical implications of the contemplation of this beauty.

In the latter he defined true virtue as a process of being so transfixed by the beauty of God as Being-in-general that those who perceive such glory are able also to grasp the as-yet unrealized beauty of every being-in-particular.⁷⁵ True virtue is a disposition (or habit of heart) that recognizes and extends the beauty of God into continually new expressions of loveliness.⁷⁶ To exercise this virtue is to participate in God's own disposition to communicate glory, bringing what is still an indiscernible beauty into con-

⁷³ Tenth Sermon in *Charity and Its Fruits*, YE 8.293. See also Gerald R. McDermott, *One Holy and Happy Society: The Public Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University, 1992) 108–9.

⁷⁴ Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, & Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life* (New York: Oxford University, 2000) 122.

⁷⁵ *The Nature of True Virtue*, YE 8.544

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* YE 8.542.

sent and union with God's own matchless grandeur. What we love in the particular person or thing is the contingent fullness of God's own beauty, wanting to replicate itself still further in creation. God, after all, is "the foundation and fountain of all being and all beauty."⁷⁷

Admittedly, love of "Being-in-general" may at first seem extremely amorphous, lacking any passion—a matter of loving everything in general and nothing in particular. But to put God's magnificence at the center of attention is to allow oneself to love not only what is already there in the person or thing, but also the mysterious potential of the other as one grasps more fully its relation to God. We perceive what is "greening" itself within, growing into a beauty that is yet incomplete, to use the language of Hildegard of Bingen.

To act ethically, then, is to act as if there truly are interrelated harmonies that exist among all beings as they cohere together in God. This is not only to perceive (and celebrate) the mirror of God's beauty in every single being, but to engage in "joyful, beautifying activity" of our own. Roland Delattre observes that, for Edwards, "beauty . . . is more fully exhibited in *bestowing* beauty than in receiving it."⁷⁸

Two implications derive from this ethical impulse in his thinking. The first is that extraordinary attentiveness and moral passion are demanded of all the lovers of God, as they help to bring the world to a consciousness of God's glorious presence within it. The meticulous powers of observation and literary artistry of an Annie Dillard and Mary Oliver are invaluable aids to the theologian's craft, drawing lines of interconnectedness across the cosmos, inciting a wonder that necessitates action. The second is that the work of recognizing and bestowing beauty has to be sustained ultimately by a transcendent and eschatological hope. It draws its strength from Gregory of Nyssa's contention that our longing for God's beauty is never finally satisfied, but presses on from glory to glory—stretching itself into eternity in its ever-expanding sensual capacity to appreciate (and extend) beauty everywhere.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Ibid. YE 8.551. Edwards explains that, "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 fullness of brightness and glory" (8.552).

⁷⁸ Roland A. Delattre, "Religious Ethics Today: Jonathan Edwards, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Beyond," in *Edwards in Our Time: Jonathan Edwards and the Shaping of American Religion*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee and Allen C. Guelzo (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 70–71. Emphasis added.

⁷⁹ Paul Ramsey compares Edwards's doctrine of perpetual progress in heaven and its relation to Gregory of Nyssa in YE 8:727–29. See also Patricia Wilson-Kastner, "God's Infinity and His Relationship to Creation in the theologies of Gregory of Nyssa and Jonathan Edwards," *Foundations* 21:4 (October–December, 1978) 305–21.

BRINGING THE WORLD TO A CONSCIOUSNESS OF ITS BEAUTY IN GOD

To contemplate the divine glory aright, according to Edwards, is to make the universe conscious of its own being. Humans function as “the consciousness of the creation,” he argued.⁸⁰ Theirs is the responsibility of discerning and articulating the esthetic/moral character of the cosmos as a mirror of God’s glory. Theirs is the task of pursuing the scientific (and liturgical) work of identifying interrelationships within the universe at large. They show how God’s beauty fills the earth in the exercise of the principles of attraction, cohesion, consent, and proportionality that characterize the dynamic life of the created world. Without this cognizance of its interconnectedness in God, the cosmos remains at risk. We mend its fragility by restoring the awareness of its coherence in God. “Except the world had such a consciousness of itself, it would be altogether in vain that it was,” Edwards could say.⁸¹ Our task as a species, therefore, is to identify and honor the conjoining of all interlocking systems in the speechless splendor of creation, bringing everything to its fullness in the glory of God. To use the language of Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, we are the earth’s activity in being aware of its future. We are “the self-reflexion of the universe,” allowing it “to know and feel itself.”⁸²

The role of human beings is to contemplate God’s beauty in the secondary beauty around and within them, to bring to conscious celebration what remains only implicit. As George Herbert put it, following in the Puritan tradition of meditations on the creatures, humans serve the rest of the world as a “secretary of God’s praise.”⁸³ This is no passive and individualistic activity, no absorption in the private contemplation of self-contained beauty. It demands the most careful and responsible study of the whole of creation, searching its particularities and relationships for every single “vestige” of the hand of the Creator, as Bonaventure would say.

Jonathan Edwards was fascinated by 18th-century science and philosophy, delighting in its attention to the intricacies of the natural world, its grand celebration of symmetry and order. But he directed its conclusions toward far different ends than Deistic thinkers like John Toland and Matthew Tindal had done. They perceived the self-contained harmony of the universe as ruling out the personal involvement of the divine. Such inter-

⁸⁰ Edwards, *Miscellanies*, no. 1, YE 13.197.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1988) 18–22; and Brian Swimme, *The Universe is a Green Dragon* (Santa Fe: Bear & Co., 1984) 58.

⁸³ George Herbert, “Providence,” in John N. Wall, ed., *George Herbert: Country Parson, The Temple* (New York: Paulist, 1983) 238.

vention, as they perceived it, was derogatory to God's omnipotence and unchangeableness. Edwards, by contrast, saw the new science as revealing a God of intimate relationships hidden within the very structure of the universe. Symmetry and interlocking order are indicators of a warm, convivial affinity, not cold indifference. His quest, then, was to incorporate Enlightenment science into the service of mystical union with Christ.

The way one thing relates to another was continually what most occupied Edwards's mind, as a scientist and theologian alike. "Reality is a matter of relationship for [him]," said Wilson Kimmach. "The higher the truth the greater the extent of relationships involved."⁸⁴ The Massachusetts pastor was overwhelmed by the interconnecting unities that make up the universe. "When we think of the sweet harmony of the parts of the corporeal world," he exclaimed, "it fills us with such astonishment that the soul is ready to break."⁸⁵ As one might express it today, the awareness of God's beauty filling the earth inevitably drives us to ecological thinking, to the recognition of the mysteries of Gaia, to the maintenance of those bonds of interrelationship and recyclings of energy that join all living beings in a great whole.

"It was, perhaps, the profoundest insight of the eighteenth century that a thing becomes meaningful when we discern its relation to something else," says another recent interpreter of Edwards's thought.⁸⁶ He was ever attentive to the "general agreeing and consenting together" of interrelated bodies in the operation of the universe. He remained spellbound by the "agreeablenesses" that one discerns "between the colors of the woods and flowers and the smell, and the singing of birds."⁸⁷ At times, he could sound like contemporary exponents of chaos theory who speak of the Butterfly Effect, noting how the beating of a butterfly's wings in China can alter weather patterns in New York City. The complexity and unpredictable wonder of the world was, for him, an expression of God's holding all things in dynamic, ever-changing relationship to each other (and to God's self). Gravity, for example, was but an expression in the realm of physics of the "attraction, or the mutual tendencies of all bodies to each other." To respond to God's beauty, then, is to value and nurture these various interrelationships, beginning to think like a mountain as Aldo Leopold said, being sensitive to all the ways that ecosystems and biotic processes operate together to sustain mutuality and homeostasis in the maintenance of life.

⁸⁴ Wilson Kimmach, "Jonathan Edwards's Pursuit of Reality," in *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Harry S. Stout (New York: Oxford University, 1988) 106.

⁸⁵ *Miscellanies*, no. 42, YE 13.224.

⁸⁶ Leon Chai, *Jonathan Edwards and the Limits of Enlightenment Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University, 1998) 35.

⁸⁷ "The Mind," no. 62, YE 11.380; and "The Beauty of the World," YE 6.305.

This, Edwards thought, is an expression of the finest exercise of God's glory. Accordingly, "it is requisite that the beauty and excellency of the world, as God has constituted it, should not be kept secret."⁸⁸

ECOLOGICAL ETHICS AND ESCHATOLOGICAL HOPE

If ethical practice is necessary to preserve the world in its divinely appointed task of evincing God's beauty in the joining of all things together in love, it is also necessary that this practice be anchored in an eschatological hope. Only there can it find the power able to sustain deliberate action. The task of continually recognizing and extending beauty is one that reaches ultimately into eternity. Indeed, the earth itself participates in a longing that yearns for the fullness of interrelatedness that redemption (in and beyond history) finally brings. Edwards says, "Though the creature is [now] subjected to vanity, yet it don't rest in this subject, but is constantly acting and exerting itself in order that the glorious liberty that God has appointed [might appear]. . . all the creatures, in all their operations and motions, continually tend to this."⁸⁹

Edwards's theology is unequivocally God centered and future oriented, reminding one at times of Teilhard de Chardin. He is a God-intoxicated thinker, seeing everything to cohere at last in the Holy Trinity. It might seem strange to root an environmental ethic in a theology of profound transcendence. But Edwards would say that there is no foundation for the true worth of the world in anything less than God. In a boldly theocentric theology anthropocentrism is radically judged. For Edwards, human beings realize their createdness most fully, not in their exercise of *dominion*, but in their ability to *delight*, to extol beauty and nurture relationship. Moreover, this practice of delight is one that reaches with the rest of creation to a realization beyond the immediate limits of history. Edwards's keen expectation of the coming millennium included a confidence that natural phenomena will be seen and known still more perfectly in the age to come. He concludes that: "[t]he late invention of telescopes, whereby heavenly objects are brought so much nearer and made so much plainer to sight . . . is a type and forerunner of the great increase in the knowledge of heavenly things that shall be in the approaching glorious times."⁹⁰

Paula Coe argues that "understanding Edwards' apocalypticism is essential to understanding his view of nature." Admittedly, at times he seems ambivalent about the continuity of the present world of nature in the age

⁸⁸ *Images of Divine Things*, no. 79, YE 11.81.

⁸⁹ "An Humble Attempt," YE 5.345.

⁹⁰ *Images of Divine Things*, no. 146, YE 11.101.

to come, twisted as it is by sin.⁹¹ He can speak of the “very material frame of the old heavens and old earth” as finally being “destroyed” so that a new heaven and earth can be created.⁹² After all, once one has seen (in the beatific vision) the ultimate Beauty to which the physical world as a school of desire has pointed all along, there is no need any more for a teacher. On the other hand, Edwards knew that one *never* stops learning, and longing, in the unending sensory process of knowing/delighting in God’s beauty.

Thus, he declared that the heaven to which the saints are taken in the “new heavens and new earth” will still be a part of this universe, where the laws of nature continue to apply. It will be a “place of the habitation of bodies as well as souls, a place wherein their bodily sense shall be exercised.”⁹³ Human sensory perception and the exercise of delight will not only persist there, but be extended in remarkably astounding ways. “The beauty of the bodies of the saints in the new earth . . . shall not only consist in the most charming proportion of features and parts of their bodies, and their light and proportion of colors, but much in the manifestation of the excellencies of their mind . . .”⁹⁴

All manner of sensory enhancements will accompany the embodiment of the saints in heaven. Edwards anticipated their range of hearing and seeing to be vastly improved, enabling them to perceive multiple ratios of resonance that make up a single harmony or to glimpse “the beauty of another’s countenance” at a thousand miles distance.

How ravishing are the proportions of the reflections of rays of light, and the proportions of the vibrations of the air! And without doubt, God can contrive matter so that there shall be other sort of proportions, that may be quite of a different kind, and may raise another sort of pleasure in a sense, and in a manner to us inconceivable, that shall be vastly more ravishing and exquisite. . . . there shall be external beauties and harmonies altogether of another kind from what we perceive here, and probably those beauties will appear chiefly on the bodies of the man Christ Jesus and of the saints.⁹⁵

For Jonathan Edwards, the spiritual life is eternally a sensuous life. It carries with it the hope of a continual expansion of sensory delight in the splendor of God. Such is what finally gives this world and the next their enduring worth and importance. The ecological responsibility that humans share for the biosphere in which they live is intricately tied to the earth’s role in reaching with them toward the endless expansion of God’s beauty.

⁹¹ Cooley, *Jonathan Edwards on Nature and Destiny* 7.

⁹² *History of Redemption*, YE 9.509.

⁹³ *Miscellanies*, no. 743, YE 18.379–83; and “Apocalypse Series,” no. 41, in YE 5.141.

⁹⁴ *Miscellanies*, no. 149, YE 13.301.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* no. 182, YE 13.328–29.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we find in Jonathan Edwards a theologian who understands the contemplation of the natural world as an exercise in prayer. The physical universe is, for him, a mirror of God's glory, participating in what it reflects. The world is not simply a thin veil through which we reach toward a God wholly beyond it. For Edwards, nature—in all of its sensory palpability—is itself taken up into the still more sensuous glory of God. In the process, it teaches us desire, opening its mysteries to all those who have received a new sense for the perceiving and extending of beauty in their common life.

It would be inappropriate to project back onto Jonathan Edwards in his 18th-century setting a developed ecological sensitivity. Yet the richly sensual spirituality that he taught is highly compatible with contemporary environmental concerns. As he himself affirmed, we share necessarily in the sufferings of the earth, straining at times to recognize the hidden and marred beauty within it. As we apply his theology 300 years later, we ourselves need to assume responsibility for the abuses we have brought upon the planet. In polluted rivers and smog-filled skies, we confront again the agony of the cross. God's own deepest longing to communicate beauty, witnessed most poignantly at Golgotha, demands of us the mending and nurturing of interrelationships among all that lives.

If it is true that, as humans, we share with all other creatures a common capacity to delight in the sweet taste of life itself, if we are in some way "family"—joined by social ties that have their roots in the trinitarian life of God—and if the future toward which we are growing involves a sabbath rest embracing the whole of creation, then we simply cannot act any longer as if we were disconnected from a lifeless universe toward which we bear no responsibility. We need to commit ourselves, at last, to honoring the web of life, with all of its intimate connections. The very beauty of God requires this of us.