

JONATHAN EDWARDS'S PHILOSOPHICAL INFLUENCES: LOCKEAN OR MALEBRANCHEAN?

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In Perry Miller's intellectual biography of Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758),¹ he claims that when Edwards discovered and read John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in 1717, this was "the central and decisive event in his intellectual life."² Indeed, Miller's book makes much of the influence of Locke and Isaac Newton on Edwards's thinking.

In their *History of Philosophy in America*, Elizabeth Flower and Murray Murphey make a similar claim to Miller (and this is not surprising as they frequently cite Miller's work on Edwards!). They assert that Edwards was "early converted to the teaching of Locke and Newton."³ Morton White declares that Locke's *Essay* "exerted an enormous influence on Edwards' thought" in that it provided the "general framework within which he worked."⁴

Moreover, one gets the very strong impression from reading Miller's biography that apart from the influences of Locke and Newton, New England was a fairly isolated enclave, cut off from exposure to new ideas from Britain and Continental Europe. Whether or not Miller intended to give this impression, it is certainly not accurate. For there existed certain "lifeline journals" which furnished notables like Edwards, Cotton Mather, and the American Samuel Johnson with the latest information on new books and advancing ideas.⁵

Taking an opposing view to Miller, Flower and Murphey, and White is Norman Fiering. In his book *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought and Its British Context*,⁶ he argues that despite the impact of Locke's *Essay* in Britain and in colonial America, Locke is wrongly credited with having had a

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¹ Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (Toronto: William Sloane Associates, 1949). Miller asserts, "The real life of Jonathan Edwards was the life of his mind." Hence, Miller focuses upon the "drama of his ideas" (xi).

² *Ibid.* 52.

³ Flower and Murphey, *A History of Philosophy in America*, vol. 1 (New York: Capricorn Books, 1977) 142.

⁴ Morton White, *Science and Sentiment in America: Philosophical Thought from Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972) 35.

⁵ See Norman Fiering's extensive documentation of such periodicals in "The Transatlantic Republic of Letters: A Note on the Circulation of Learned Periodicals to Early Eighteenth-Century America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 33 (1976) 642–660.

⁶ (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981).

deep influence on Edwards. Unlike Miller, Fiering presents a far broader intellectual backdrop to Edwards's thought. He proposes that we think in terms of a *milieu* rather than *individual influences*; our knowing the unities makes knowing the specifics less urgent.⁷

Fiering suggests that if anyone actually exerted a significant influence on Edwards, it was Nicholas Malebranche and his most famous English disciple and translator, John Norris. In addition to Fiering, Charles McCracken points out that Malebranche's ideas had an influence on not only Edwards, but also Cotton Mather and the American Samuel Johnson.⁸

In this paper, I would like to examine the question: which philosophical influence on Edwards is most obvious—the Lockean or the Malebranchean? I shall contend that the Lockean source is, in the main, insufficient to account for what we read in Edwards's writings. On the other hand, a Malebranchean influence on Edwards is far more likely. Although, according to Fiering, there is no direct or external evidence that Edwards ever read Malebranche's works, Fiering believes that the similarities between Malebranche and Edwards are so remarkable that it seems quite plausible that Edwards read Malebranche—and that at a very young age.⁹ This should not come as a surprise as Malebranche's *Search After Truth* was translated into English in 1694 (in London) *twice*—one by Richard Sault and the other by Thomas Taylor, each translation done independently of the other.¹⁰

Richard Steele confidently asserts that Edwards "certainly knew" thinkers like Malebranche and Norris, *inter alia*.¹¹ Moreover, in Edwards's later work, *The Nature of True Virtue*, he interacts with the moral philosophy of Francis Hutcheson, who refers to Malebranche in his writings.¹² Also, Edwards had read Andrew ("Chevalier") Ramsay's *Philosophical Principles of Revealed Religion*, in which he copies profusely from Malebranche.¹³

In any event, it seems clear that Edwards at least read John Norris's *The Theory of the Ideal or Intelligible World*, which is an exposition of Malebranche's views.¹⁴ Moreover, Norris not only found favor with the English Puritans, but was also one of the effective early critics of Locke.¹⁵

Admittedly, one can unfairly categorize the thought of someone like Edwards so rigidly as to disallow any originality or strategy of reasoning on

⁷ Richard B. Steele, "Gracious Affection" and "True Virtue" According to Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley, *Pietist and Wesleyan Studies*, No. 5 (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1994) 21, 72n. (Richard Steele adds that there existed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries within the various branches of the Reformed tradition and the Euro-American community a "considerable intellectual cross-fertilization.")

⁸ Charles J. McCracken, *Malebranche and British Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983) 316–340.

⁹ Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought* 40.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 42–43.

¹¹ Richard B. Steele, "Gracious Affection" and "True Virtue" 72n.

¹² For instance, see the citation in Richard Steele, "Gracious Affection" and "True Virtue" 322, which begins: ". . . [A]ll the passions and affections justify themselves; while they continue (as Malebranche expresses it) we approve generally our being thus affected . . ." (my emphasis).

¹³ McCracken, *Malebranche and British Philosophy* 331.

¹⁴ (London: n.p., 1701; repr. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1974).

¹⁵ Richard B. Steele, "Gracious Affection" and "True Virtue" 72n.

his part. Stephen Daniel makes this comment: "to trace Edwards' position to his predecessors—a typically modernist move made by other scholars . . . —merely begs the question of how their positions embody a strategy of reasoning in terms of which Edwards is intelligible."¹⁶ Thus, in this paper I shall try to show which strand of thought—Lockean or Malebranchean—may provide a more helpful context for understanding Edwards's philosophy, while pointing out areas where Edwards exhibits his own creative thought.

Before looking at Edwards's ideas in greater detail, I shall briefly examine the historical question that often arises in support of the Lockean interpretation. Then I shall examine how Edwards compares to Locke and then how Edwards compares to Malebranche.

I. A POSSIBLE HISTORICAL OBJECTION FROM SAMUEL HOPKINS'S ANECDOTE

One may possibly protest my questioning the Lockean thesis by pointing to Samuel Hopkins's famous statement made by Edwards about Locke. According to Hopkins (Edwards's personal friend and early biographer), Edwards, toward the end of his life, held up a copy of Locke's *Essay* and openly declared to some of his friends that when he read Locke at the age of fourteen, he did so with more pleasure than "the most greedy Miser [finds] in gathering up handfuls of Silver and Gold from some new discover'd Treasure."¹⁷

Despite this *prima facie* support for Locke's influence, there is some ambiguity and lack of clarity about Hopkins's claim. In the first place, Wallace Anderson notes that the evidence for Edwards's having read Locke's *Essay* while a student is "mixed and indecisive at best."¹⁸ Admittedly, Edwards apparently *did* read Locke's *Essay* at Yale. For instance, Edwards's work in "Of Atoms" reflects Locke's concept of matter as solidity (as opposed to the Cartesian notion of matter as being spatially extended); also, Edwards's views of personal identity in "The Mind" seems to derive, at least in part, from Locke.¹⁹ What we can say is that *if* Edwards read Locke at this time (and there is some evidence that he was familiar with some of Locke's ideas), he "certainly did not" express in any of his collegiate writings anything of the "greedy zest" for Locke's ideas that Hopkins's statement has led some to believe.²⁰

Moreover, there is nothing to indicate that he *seriously* studied Locke during any part of his undergraduate and graduate years at Yale.²¹ In addition,

¹⁶ Stephen H. Daniel, *The Philosophy of Jonathan Edwards: A Study in Divine Semiotics* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994) 9.

¹⁷ Cited in Wallace E. Anderson, ed., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: Scientific and Philosophical Writings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980) 17. Hopkins's work was *The Life and Character of the Late Mr. Jonathan Edwards*, which was published in Boston in 1765.

¹⁸ Anderson in *Scientific and Philosophical Writings* 26.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 25–26.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 26.

²¹ *Ibid.* 25.

Hopkins's reference to Locke is nearly the *only* mention he makes of intellectual influences on Edwards. It may be for this reason that Locke is credited with such a significant role in Edwards's thought.

Finally, we ought to take note that Edwards did *not* say that he was convinced by much of what Locke wrote. In fact, he could *not* have done so given the major differences between the two philosophers.

II. A COMPARISON OF EDWARDS AND LOCKE

Perry Miller emphasizes that Edwards shared much of the same intellectual territory with Locke, the "master-spirit of the age."²² Miller repeatedly makes assertions to this effect: Edwards "always exalted experience over reason" and condemned as nonsensical "all views that regard reason as a rule superior to experience."²³ Again, concerning the premise that the mind knows no more than its ideas (which depend upon and derive from the senses), Miller writes that "Edwards' fundamental premise was Locke's."²⁴ Locke helped furnish Edwards with an alternative to an "antiquated metaphysic" which had been utilized by other Puritan thinkers.²⁵

Edwards's appreciation for the natural world cannot be denied. His "Spider" letter of 1723 is an example of Edwards's interest in the natural world and of his keen powers of observation. But for Edwards, to refer to objects of our everyday experience is not in itself an argument for his commitment to a material external world. As I point out below, Edwards was *not* a sensationist.

With these introductory remarks, I shall now explore the plausibility of the claim that Locke significantly influenced Edwards. I shall first look at miscellaneous areas of disagreement between Locke and Edwards. Then I shall examine Locke's notion of "ideas." Finally, I shall note Locke's materialism and how this does not square with Edwards in the least.

1. *Miscellaneous areas of disagreement.* Fiering makes the claim that "Edwards was no Lockean."²⁶ In fact, he does not follow Locke on any single significant point in moral philosophy. The same applies to logic and metaphysics.

Edwards forthrightly disagrees with Locke about the nature of personal identity. Locke dubiously locates such identity in memory.²⁷ Although this notion "seems never yet to have been explained," Edwards makes clear that personal identity cannot consist in having the same ideas presently and in the past (memory). Edwards maintains, rightly in my view, that

²² Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* 52.

²³ *Ibid.* 45.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 55.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 56.

²⁶ Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought* 37.

²⁷ See John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (ed. John W. Yolton; London/New York: Dent/Dutton, 1976) 2.27.

God could, say, annihilate me and then create another being that has the same ideas in his mind that I have in mine. God could do the same with two beings as well.²⁸

Another significant area of disagreement between Locke and Edwards is on sensation as *the* source of knowledge. Locke makes plain his position in his *Essay*: "This great source of most of the *ideas* we have, depending mostly on the senses, and derived by them to the understanding, I call SENSATION."²⁹

Now Miller claims that "Edwards' fundamental premise was Locke's"—namely, ideas are derived through sensation.³⁰ On the face of it, Edwards does appear to resemble Locke in this regard. For instance, when speaking of sensation, he says that "all ideas begin from thence."³¹ But it seems that Fiering more clearly grasps Edwards's position. Edwards's belief in the moral sense and the spiritual sense (which God grants humans and is a divine influence upon the will or affections) would have been repudiated by Locke as "enthusiastick" nonsense.³² Would Edwards really have attributed the impact of his sermons on his hearers in the Great Awakening to the affects of sensation? Certainly not! It would have been the penetration of God's Spirit.³³ As a matter of fact, Edwards, in his *Treatise on Religious Affections*, disparaged Locke's sensations as a source of knowledge as the *lowest* kind. They are "below" the intellectual exercises of the soul because the body is less noble than the soul.³⁴ As will become apparent in the second section, for Edwards metaphysics took precedence over epistemology. The immediacy of God in "the sense of the heart" is where God acts not through external structures of nature, but internally within man's mind by his Spirit.³⁵

2. *Locke's notion of "idea."* In general, Locke defines an idea as the term which stands for "whatsoever is the object of understanding when a man thinks."³⁶ Locke also makes the distinction between simple and complex ideas.³⁷ The former are "unmixed" and "uncompounded" qualities that affect our senses. The latter are the result of the understanding's power to take simple ideas and "repeat, compare, and unite them, even to an almost infinite variety" and form "at pleasure" new complex ideas.³⁸

When Perry Miller sees Edwards's reference to ideas as reflective of Locke's influence, this is indeed curious. For instance, the notion of simple

²⁸ This is taken from "The Mind," in Anderson, ed., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: Scientific and Philosophical Writings* #72, 385–386. All citations of Edwards, unless otherwise noted, are taken from this particular volume of his writings edited by Wallace Anderson.

²⁹ Locke, *Essay* 2.1.4.

³⁰ Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* 55.

³¹ Edwards, "The Mind" (in the section, "The Natural History of the Mental World") #29, 390.

³² Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought* 125.

³³ David C. Brand, *Profile of the Last Puritan: Jonathan Edwards, Self-Love, and the Dawn of the Beatific* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1991) 45.

³⁴ Taken from Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought* 125–126n.

³⁵ William S. Morris, "The Genius of Jonathan Edwards," in Jerald C. Brauer, ed., *Reinterpretation in American Church History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968) 35.

³⁶ *Essay* 1.1.8.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 2.2.1, for example.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 2.2.2.

and complex ideas was hardly new with Locke. While Locke may have given new definition to these categories, they had been used by others as almost stock terms—including Heereboord and Malebranche. In his *Search After Truth*, Malebranche says that we should reason only of things about which we have clear ideas. As a necessary consequence, we should “*always begin with the simplest and easiest things . . . before undertaking the search after the most complex and difficult ones.*”³⁹ (Incidentally, Locke critically says of Malebranche in his “Examination” that “we see nothing [in Malebranche] but God and ideas”!)⁴⁰

Moreover, Locke is famous for his opposition to any innate ideas. He said that if children and idiots do not perceive these principles, how can they be said to be innate?⁴¹ (Of course, he wrongly assumed that these innate ideas had to be the objects of our knowledge rather than the instruments for obtaining knowledge—whether we are aware of them or not.) Although Locke’s anti-innatist influence was strong in his day, it seems that Edwards maintained another kind of innatism.

Fiering asserts that it is a mistake to assume that Locke’s critique of innate ideas was an essential step leading to Edwards’s metaphysics. Although Locke was perceived to have dealt a death blow to a Platonic innatism, Edwards, who was committed to a spiritualized theory of knowledge and metaphysics, found immaterialism a satisfying substitute. Edwards maintained that the mind has direct access to divine ideas without the need for sensory mediation (Locke’s notion of material representation). As I shall point out in the next section, it is Malebranche’s—not Locke’s—writings on how external objects are known that show greater resemblance to Edwards’s views on this point.⁴²

3. *Locke’s materialism.* Locke makes the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Primary qualities are utterly inseparable from bodies. They really exist in bodies. These qualities are solidity, extension, figure, and motion or mobility. Secondary qualities, on the other hand, are simply power to produce various sensations. These qualities somehow effect in us ideas such as color, odor, sound, warmth, and smell. It is this distinction of primary and secondary qualities that makes Locke’s physical realism most apparent.

Miller indicates that Edwards followed Locke on his primary-secondary quality distinction. Miller points out, however, that Edwards extended Locke’s view of secondary qualities (as being in the mind rather than in the object itself) to primary qualities as well.⁴³ But again Miller, it appears, at-

³⁹ Malebranche, *The Search After Truth* 6.2.1, 438 (not my italics).

⁴⁰ This citation is from Steven Nadler, *Malebranche and Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) 157.

⁴¹ Locke, *Essay* 1.2.5.

⁴² See Fiering’s discussion in “The Rationalist Foundations of Jonathan Edwards’s Metaphysics” 85–86. Edwards maintained an idealistic version of the correspondence theory of truth: “Truth . . . may be defined after the most strict and metaphysical manner: ‘the consistency and agreement of our ideas with the ideas of God’” (“The Mind” #10, 341–342).

⁴³ Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* 60.

taches too much significance to Locke as the source of this distinction. This categorization of qualities was quite common in Locke's day. Boyle, Descartes, Galileo, and others before Locke had also utilized this division. To Locke's mind, he was convinced by the new physics of Newton that such a distinction was necessary.⁴⁴ Again, I do not deny that Locke's work could have influenced Edwards on this matter of secondary qualities. However, Edwards himself points out that "every knowing philosopher" agrees that "colors are not really in the things, no more than pain is in a needle." Rather, they are "in the mind" only.⁴⁵ Such an assertion bears out the fact that Locke was not the only one holding to the distinction between primary and secondary qualities and that the latter were mental. According to Fiering, while Locke was a significant contributor to a certain milieu of ideas, he certainly did not single-handedly bring about a kind of philosophical Copernican revolution. In fact, his views "were not entirely surprising or novel to any student of the philosophical thought of the late seventeenth century."⁴⁶

Locke in his "Examination" objected to Malebranche's vision in God because we have no means by which we can see or perceive bodies by our senses. We can't know whether or not anything beyond God and ideas even exists. Thus one never even sees the sun itself—or any external body, but only the *idea* of the sun.⁴⁷ Locke considered it irrational to believe that God would create a world full of bodies but yet not allow the soul to perceive those bodies. But Locke, then, would have had to level the same charges at Edwards the immaterialist.⁴⁸

As I shall explain more fully below, Edwards claimed that, with respect to bodies, "there is no proper substance but God himself."⁴⁹ More precisely, however, Edwards considers those beings that have "knowledge and consciousness" to be the "only proper and real and substantial beings."⁵⁰ In contrast to those who think that material things have true substance whereas spirits are more like shadows, Edwards argues that "spirits are only properly substance."⁵¹ But this is a significant difference from Locke, who (along with Newton) maintained that matter is a substance. Even though tables, chairs, trees, and stones have properties, there must be an enduring substratum,

⁴⁴ James Gordon Clapp, "Locke, John," in Paul Edwards, ed., *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 4 (New York: Macmillan, 1967) 492.

⁴⁵ "The Mind" #27, 350.

⁴⁶ Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought* 38.

⁴⁷ From Nadler, *Malebranche and Ideas* 157. In his *Theory of the Ideal World*, Norris (whom Edwards read) takes to task the Lockean axiom that "there is nothing in the Understanding but what was first in the Sense" (374). He counters that we perceive *God*, for instance, or we have ideas of "pure Intellect," which are immaterial—order, truth, justice, goodness, being, etc. These notions bear absolutely no relation to "Matter and Motion" (375). Norris concludes (having "abundantly proved") that the ideas whereby we understand do not come to us through sensible objects (376).

⁴⁸ Repudiating a mechanical cause of gravity, Edwards said that it can be attributed to "the immediate operation of God." Not only gravity, but all bodies depend upon God's power for their existence ("Things to be Considered" #22, 234).

⁴⁹ "Of Atoms" Corol. 11, 215.

⁵⁰ "Of Being" Corol. 1, 206.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

subject, or *hypokeimenon* which has these properties. In his *Essay*, Locke appeals to our common-sense experience to defend this notion of an enduring substratum. On the one hand, we are aware of properties of things, but on the other hand, we assume that a *thing* has these properties—even though “we know not what it is.” And for Locke, there are two kinds of substance—whether as a body (which is “a *thing* that is extended, figured, and capable of motion”) or a spirit (which is “a *thing* capable of thinking”).⁵²

It seems that Edwards was attempting to rescue others from a Lockean skepticism (“we know not what it is”). For Edwards, that “something” which upholds all properties is God: “But men [like Locke!] are wont to content themselves in saying merely that it is something; but that ‘something’ is he by whom all things consist.”⁵³

In an essay on Jonathan Edwards’s immaterialism, Wallace Anderson argues that for all the publicity the Lockean-influence-on-Edwards theory has gotten, it fares quite poorly where one would most expect it to succeed: “though Locke’s *Essay* is supposed by many to have had a leading rôle in moving him to their formulation,” Anderson states, “we have found no need whatever to appeal to the concepts or doctrines of Locke for either the sources or the interpretation of Edwards’ arguments here.”⁵⁴

III. A COMPARISON OF MALEBRANCHE AND EDWARDS

In the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, we read that the rationalism Locke exhibited was quite different from that of Continental thinkers like Descartes, Spinoza, and Malebranche.⁵⁵ Thus if the rational/metaphysical views of Edwards resemble Locke’s, then they in all likelihood would be quite distinct from Malebranche’s as well. But is this what we find? I do not think so.

Having attempted to make a negative case in the first section—namely, that at key points in their thought Locke and Edwards are worlds apart, we move on to the positive case—namely, the striking similarity in thought between Edwards and Malebranche. (This similarity between the American Puritan and the French Catholic, incidentally, is not wholly due to their adherence to a generally Augustinian theology.)

Fiering elsewhere⁵⁶ argues that there were five traditions or attitudes that were prevalent during Edwards’s time and that they were circulating completely independently of Locke’s influence. These five ideas were the main tenets in Edwards’s metaphysics:

- (1) the affirmation of total divine sovereignty (such that events in the universe are entirely free from any contingency);

⁵² *Essay* 2.23.3.

⁵³ Edwards, “The Mind” #61, 380.

⁵⁴ Wallace E. Anderson, “Jonathan Edwards on Immaterialism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 25 (1964) 191.

⁵⁵ James Gordon Clapp, “Locke, John” 489.

⁵⁶ Norman Fiering, “The Rationalist Foundations of Jonathan Edwards’s Metaphysics,” in Nathan O. Hatch and Harry S. Stout, ed., *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 77–78.

- (2) the belief in divine concurrence in events and in the continuous conservation and re-creation of the existing world;
- (3) a commitment to teleology at the ultimate level of explanation (i.e. everything exists for some divine purpose);
- (4) the acceptance of a Neoplatonic typology which posited divine archetypes and their ectypal representations on earth;
- (5) the repudiation of the Cartesian idea that the essence of matter is extension.

Incidentally, we should note that what is central to Edwards's metaphysics is not, as some have thought, that physical objects exist only in the mind or that, as Berkeley maintained, that physical objects cannot exist unless they are perceived (*esse est percipi*). Rather, his leading metaphysical principle is that nothing can be without being known. His idealism, thus, logically flows from this thesis.⁵⁷

To my thinking, Fiering makes a better case for a Malebranchean influence on Edwards than Miller does for a Lockean one. With some minor variations, these five tenets fit quite nicely within the philosophical framework of Malebranche and of others like Norris, who were influenced by him and who, in turn, exerted an influence on Edwards. Norris's *Theory of the Ideal or Intelligible World* was part of the collection that Jeremiah Dummer gave to Yale University (1718), two years after Edwards began there—not to mention that his writings were found in many early American libraries.⁵⁸ As Anderson comments, Edwards was exposed to a much “wider and richer field of literature” at Yale than his predecessors.⁵⁹ In fact, as I mentioned above, Fiering is confident that not only did Edwards read Norris but may well have read—as his “Catalogue” of readings indicates—Malebranche's *Search After Truth*: “there are grounds for confidence in what we know about what [Edwards] did read.”⁶⁰

For instance, Fiering points out a telling parallel between Malebranche and Edwards.⁶¹ Malebranche tries to show how the body and soul are distinct. He says that “a thought is neither round nor square.” He then later asks, “[B]y what line could a pleasure, a pain, or a desire conceivably be cut, and what figure would result from this division?”⁶² Edwards asks similar questions: “Is love square or round?” “Is the surface of hatred rough or smooth?” and “Is joy an inch, or a foot in diameter? These are spiritual things.”⁶³ The similarity between these two passages appears to bear out a Malebranchean influence on Edwards.

I shall now proceed to look at the five theses.

⁵⁷ Anderson in *Scientific and Philosophical Writings* 76–77.

⁵⁸ Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought* 43n.

⁵⁹ Anderson, *Scientific and Philosophical Writings* 21.

⁶⁰ Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought* 45. Fiering points out that Edwards's “Catalogue” of readings mentions Malebranche twice in its earliest pages. There reference is made to “Some of Malebranche's writing” and “Malebranche's Search After Truth” (which is crossed out, apparently indicating that he had gotten the book and read it [44]).

⁶¹ Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought* 46.

⁶² Malebranche, *The Search After Truth* 4.2.4, 273.

⁶³ Edwards, “The Mind” #2, 338.

1. *The affirmation of total divine sovereignty (such that events in the universe are entirely free from any contingency).* According to Malebranche, “we can see all things in God.”⁶⁴ It is not that we *do* see all things in God in actuality, but we see in God the things of which we have ideas. We know God and corporeal things through God since only God contains the intelligible world, where the ideas of all things are located.

For Malebranche, God “does it all,” being the only true cause. So it would be impossible in principle for, say, the mind to act on the body or vice versa. There is a kind of theological determinism behind Malebranche’s writings. Although he believes that humans have a will and have a kind of freedom, if (as we shall note below) God is the cause of all our ideas, then it seems that what we choose is the inevitable outcome of God’s causal influence. Our ideas are really *God’s* ideas; to use Malebranche’s terms, “our ideas are in God.” These ideas become available to us only because *God wills* them to be present to our minds. It is precisely this elevated view of divine sovereignty that we witness in Edwards’s works.

As part of this first point, we could also refer to Edwards’s use of God as *Being in general* or the *Being of Beings*, the *Ens entium*. This terminology is certainly not Lockean, as Locke eschewed this notion of the “vast ocean of Being,” but rather Malebranchian. In “Of Atoms,” Edwards refers to God as the *ens entium*. Edwards is following the Thomistic tradition of *ens commune* (being in general), in which God, whose essence is to exist, is the source of all being. Whereas creatures *have* being (*habens esse*), God *is* being (*esse*) itself. For both Edwards and Malebranche, “being in general” or “universal being” included “nature” and God, who is above nature.⁶⁵ Like Scotus, Edwards and Malebranche believed that every *particular* being is like God in its existence but differs from God only because it in some measure lacks being.⁶⁶ Malebranche and Edwards *both* believed that God is the sum of all particular existent things and that his being includes “the contingent possibility of particular things.”⁶⁷ Unlike created minds, Malebranche says, God’s mind contains all beings. He might thus be called “universal being.”⁶⁸ He says that God, “the universal Being, contains all beings within Himself.”⁶⁹

Malebranche speaks of God as “all being” and “no being in particular.”⁷⁰ God’s true name is “HE WHO IS, i.e. unrestricted being, all being, the infinite and universal being.”⁷¹ Moreover, all beings are present to our mind only because God, “who includes all things in the simplicity of His being,” is

⁶⁴ Malebranche, *The Search after Truth* 3.2.7.3, 237.

⁶⁵ See Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Thought* 326. Diverging from St. Thomas, Edwards sees God as *having* proportionally (or, infinitely) more being than creatures have. Thus God *has* being (rather than *is* being), albeit infinitely so, as creatures *have* being.

⁶⁶ McCracken, *Malebranche and British Philosophy* 332.

⁶⁷ Anderson in *Scientific and Philosophical Writings* 72.

⁶⁸ Malebranche, *The Search After Truth* 3.2.6, 229.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* Elucidation #10, 618.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 3.2.6, 231.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 3.2.9, 251; cf. 3.2.8, 241: God is “the being without individual restriction, the infinite being, being in general.”

present to it.⁷² Edwards follows Malebranche in holding that every *particular* being is *like* God in its existence; as I just mentioned, it differs from God only because it lacks being in some measure.

One cannot help but see Malebranchian themes along these lines emerging in Edwards's work *The Nature of True Virtue*. One observes this especially in the connection between being in general and virtue—namely, *virtue consists in a love of being in general*. For instance, Malebranche writes that “if we do not to some extent see God, we see nothing”—just as if “we do not love God, i.e. if God were not continuously impressing upon us the love of good in general, we would love nothing.”⁷³ Edwards says this of true virtue: “True virtue most essentially consists in *benevolence to being in general*.”⁷⁴ And again, he says that “true virtue does primarily and most essentially consist in a supreme love to God; and that where this is wanting there can be no true virtue.”⁷⁵ In fact, if every affection is not subordinate to God, then one sets himself *against* being in general.⁷⁶ At the top of the “universal system of existence” is God, through whom we must love particular creatures.

2. *The belief in divine concurrence in events and in the continuous conservation and re-creation of the existing world.* Probably not much needs to be said on this second point. Occasionalism is the doctrine for which Malebranche is best known. It maintains that “finite created beings have no causal power and that God alone is the true causal agent.”⁷⁷ Finite entities are not causes except in the occasional sense: they “cause” something in that God brings the correlation from both sides, helping them to interact with each other.

For Edwards—as for the New England Puritan tradition in general—God's immediate agency determines that an entity will *exist* at any given moment as well as the *state* in which it exists at any given time. In fact, even our perceptions are caused by God. In “The Mind,” Edwards says that our “perceptions, or ideas that we passively receive by our bodies, are *communicated to us immediately by God* while our minds are united with our bodies.”⁷⁸

Perhaps the clearest passage describing Edwards's occasionalistic views is No. 47 of his “Things to be Considered.” Edwards speaks of a body's being caused “by the immediate exercise of divine power.” He sees God's wonderful power upholding the world at “every moment” just as at first, at the “creation of it.” As the preservation of the universe is only a continuation of creation, “the universe is created out of nothing every moment.”⁷⁹

⁷² Ibid. 3.2.6, 232.

⁷³ Ibid. 3.2.6, 233.

⁷⁴ Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue* 3 (Edwards's italics).

⁷⁵ Ibid. 18.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 20–21.

⁷⁷ This definition taken from “Malebranche, Nicholas,” in Robert Audi, ed., *Cambridge Companion of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 459.

⁷⁸ “The Mind” #3, 339.

⁷⁹ This string of citations is taken from “Things to be Considered” #47, 241. One could also add Edwards's *Dissertation on the End for Which God Created the World* as an example of his preoccupation with teleology.

3. *A commitment to teleology at the ultimate level of explanation (i.e. everything exists for some divine purpose).* Perry Miller claims that “by faithfully restricting himself to the limits Locke imposed,” Edwards landed upon a rule of beauty that is “at the same time the rule of virtue.” The moment of beauty and virtue, Miller continues, depends upon “the consent, upon an act of the will, which follows upon the depth of perception.”⁸⁰ For instance, Edwards speaks of how all nature consists in things being “precisely according to strict rules of justice and harmony.”⁸¹ Making an unequivocal affirmation of the teleological nature of things, Edwards declares that “the true goodness of a thing must be its agreeableness to its end, or its fitness to answer the design for which it was made.”⁸²

However, far more than Locke, *Malebranche* is clearly concerned with the teleological fitness of things with God, such as in the relationship of particular beings to universal Being. According to Malebranche, there is an overarching Good toward which the soul is inclined. There is a necessary determination or inclination of the soul toward the general good (i.e. the universal Good, or God). Yet the soul can direct its will toward a *finite* good, as it pleases or desires. But the soul can never be captivated by a finite good because it is always directed toward the infinite good. So to cling to a finite good, which is idolatry, can only produce a restlessness within.

In *The Nature of True Virtue*, Edwards is repeatedly pointing out the teleological connection between the “consent” or “propensity of mind” toward “being in general.”⁸³ He claims that “the true goodness of a thing must be its agreeableness to its end, or its fitness to answer the design for which it was made.”⁸⁴ A Lockean system, however, in no way accounts for this kind of language. Again, Malebranchian language provides a more suitable context.

Malebranche uses a cluster of terms which are reflected in Edwards’s book on virtue. Let me focus on some of them. First, Malebranche speaks of the will’s “consent” (*consensus*) to truth and goodness.⁸⁵ Despite human passions, we must keep consent regulated. “Only to God should it subjugate its freedom.”⁸⁶ We must be slaves only to God, and it is he alone who makes clear that we should yield to him.

Similarly, Edwards spoke of consent in relationship to excellency. He defined excellency as the “consent of being to being, or being’s consent to entity.”⁸⁷ (The opposite is *dissent*.)⁸⁸ As I note below, the concept of excellency presupposes plurality and requires a “consent of parts.”⁸⁹ The ontological foundation for consent is God himself: “’Tis peculiar to God that he has

⁸⁰ Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* 243.

⁸¹ Edwards, “Things to Be Considered” #16, 231.

⁸² Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue* 24.

⁸³ *Ibid.* 25.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 24–25 (my emphasis).

⁸⁵ *The Search After Truth* 1.2, 9.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 5.4, 357.

⁸⁷ “The Mind” #1, 336.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* #45.6, 363.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* #1, 337.

beauty within himself, consisting in being's consenting with his own being, or the love of himself in his own Holy Spirit."⁹⁰

Another important term Malebranche and Edwards have in common is "union." Malebranche refers to the union between the human and divine, which is the natural and rational alignment. He urges us to admit only the "clear and evident ideas the mind receives through the union it necessarily has with the divine Word, or with eternal truth and wisdom."⁹¹ Again, "It is through this dependence, this relation, this union of our mind with the Word of God, and of our will with His love, that we are made in the image and likeness of God."⁹²

Edwards uses the term union in the same manner as Malebranche when, for example, he speaks of "the union or propensity of minds to mental or spiritual existence."⁹³ The spiritual beauty of anything is due to its "union with being in general."⁹⁴

A final term that I shall note (and there are many others—harmony, similitude, conformity, relation) is "order." Malebranche makes the point that "because order would have it that every righteous person be happy and every sinner miserable," every action or impulse toward the love of God should be rewarded, and every "contrary order" or impulse of love "not tending toward God" should be punished.⁹⁵ The will of God "agrees entirely with order and justice."⁹⁶ "God wills order in His works; what we clearly conceive to conform to order, God wills."⁹⁷ For instance, God cannot will that we love what is not worthy of love. Order requires this. Repeatedly (e.g. throughout Elucidation #8), Malebranche makes the terse statement: "Order would have it so."

Edwards, likewise, discusses "order." The above passage from Malebranche on punishment and reward sounds very much like a passage in *The Nature of True Virtue*, where Edwards talks of justice and desert in the context of order, proportion, and "the beauty of natural agreement": "that . . . approbation of justice and desert, arising from a sense of the beauty of natural agreement, and proportion, will have a kind of reflex, and direct influence to cause men to approve benevolence, and disapprove malice"—and thus to "reward" and "punish" (or "hate") them.⁹⁸

With regard to the word "order" in particular, Edwards speaks of the agreeableness of the "manner, order, and measure" of love for all things with the manner in which God exercises his love toward creatures.⁹⁹ He

⁹⁰ Ibid. #45.12, 365.

⁹¹ Malebranche, *The Search After Truth* 3.2.7, 236; 2.3.6, 195.

⁹² Ibid. 3.2.6, 235.

⁹³ Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue* 27.

⁹⁴ Ibid. 11.

⁹⁵ Malebranche, *The Search After Truth* Elucidation #13, 650.

⁹⁶ Ibid. Elucidation #7, 577.

⁹⁷ Ibid. Elucidation #8, 579.

⁹⁸ Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue* 59.

⁹⁹ Ibid. 24.

refers to the “external regularity and order” of nature which tends toward the general good.

So when one reads Malebranche’s discussion of order, union, relation, consent, and the like, one cannot help but see striking parallels in Edwards thought—particularly in *The Nature of True Virtue*.

4. *The acceptance of a neoplatonic typology which posited divine archetypes and their ectypal representations on earth.* This is a significant point on which Malebranche disagreed with Descartes. Although ideas are *mental entities* for Descartes, Malebranche claimed that ideas which function in human cognition are in God. They are essences or archetypes that exist in the divine mind (and are thus eternal and independent of finite minds). Thus they allow for the clear and distinct apprehension of objective, necessary truth.

We see this idea fleshed out in Norris’s work. He maintains that “the Ideas of all things are in God.”¹⁰⁰ The difference between our ideas and the divine ideas is this: *our* ideas are copies or pictures—“Secondary Forms or Similitudes, derived from things”; God’s ideas, on the other hand, are the originals—“*Ordinary and Archetypal* Forms.”¹⁰¹ Norris explicitly refers to the Plotinian notion of divine Exemplars.¹⁰²

Closely connected to Malebranche’s (and Norris’s) Plotinian schematization of forms is the notion of God as Being in general. According to Malebranche, “Being in general” is the necessary unity of all perfections. The partial and limited presentations of the essences of particular things are *in God*, whose perfections are unlimited.¹⁰³

An important force in seventeenth-century New England, Neoplatonism stressed harmony and order; all goodness in creation consists in its harmony or “fittingness” (*convenientia*) with God.¹⁰⁴ For Edwards, there is a harmony of things that God has appointed.¹⁰⁵ Through God’s creative power, there exists a “whole system of things” and a “series” or “train of ideas.”¹⁰⁶ Thus in Edwards’s thinking, “all nature consists in things being precisely according to strict rules of justice and harmony.”¹⁰⁷ As with the will, the conscience has harmony or excellency as its object. Conscience assents to the “beauty and harmony of things.”¹⁰⁸

Although Edwards follows Malebranche’s line of thinking, he diverges from it in some ways. For example, instead of referring to “perfection,” Edwards prefers the term “excellency,” which he defines as the “consent of being to being, or being’s consent to entity.”¹⁰⁹ His theory of excellency differs from the Platonic and Augustinian notion of perfection in that excellency is

¹⁰⁰ Norris, *Theory of the Ideal World* 230.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* 231.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* 240.

¹⁰³ Anderson in *Scientific and Philosophical Writings* 72–73.

¹⁰⁴ Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Thought* 70–71.

¹⁰⁵ Edwards, “The Mind” #40, 357.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* #40, 357.

¹⁰⁷ Edwards, “Things to be Considered,” Long Series #16, 231.

¹⁰⁸ Edwards, “The Mind” #39, 356.

¹⁰⁹ “The Mind,” #1, 336.

relational. As he says in "The Mind," "One alone, without any reference to any more, cannot be excellent."¹¹⁰ For there to be excellency, there must be a "consent of parts," and the highest excellency must be "the consent of spirits one to another." Thus excellency requires "plurality."¹¹¹ The Plotinian hierarchy becomes apparent in that the greater a being is and the more that it has of entity, the more perfected this thing is. Therefore it comes nearer to the Creator in this regard.¹¹²

Similar to Edwards, Norris held that the creation is an emanation of Christ. In the context of the original creation's being a "Copy" and an "Extract" and in "near Conformity to its Ideal Pattern," Norris writes that the beauty of the world is "truly Divine" in that "'tis the Beauty of him that is the Brightness of his Father's Glory, and the express Image of his Person."¹¹³ His beauty is one that is "purely Intellectual, the beauty of Truth, of Order, of Reason, of Proportion, and of Wisdom."¹¹⁴

5. *The repudiation of the Cartesian idea that the essence of matter is extension.* In Descartes's sixth *Meditation*, he writes that "my essence consists only in being a thinking thing." Because I am a thinking thing (*res cogitans*), I possess a distinct idea of my body, which is "extended and unthinking."¹¹⁵ The essence of spiritual substance is *thinking* whereas the essence of corporeal substance is *extension*; it is a *res extensa*. Malebranche echoed this belief: "Thought alone, then, is the essence of mind, just as extension alone is the essence of matter."¹¹⁶

Edwards clearly diverges from Malebranche on this point—although he *ends up* with the same kind of occasionalism as Malebranche. Edwards is more sympathetic with Locke's view that *solidity* is essential to bodies. States Locke, "This [i.e. solidity], of all the others, seems the *idea* most intimately connected with and essential to body, so as nowhere else to be found or imagined, but only in matter."¹¹⁷ In Edwards's words, "But we know and everyone perceives it to be a contradiction to suppose that body or matter exists without solidity."¹¹⁸ That is to say, if a body exists and then the solidity is removed, the body is likewise removed:¹¹⁹ "It is intuitively certain that if solidity be removed from body, nothing is left but empty space."¹²⁰

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 337.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Norris, *Theory of the Ideal World* 429.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. 429–430. See Fiering's discussion in "The Rationalist Foundations of Jonathan Edwards's Metaphysics" 83–84.

¹¹⁵ René Descartes, *The Meditations and Selections from the Principles of René Descartes* (Chicago: Open Court, 1927) 91.

¹¹⁶ Malebranche, *The Search After Truth* 3.1.1, 198.

¹¹⁷ Locke, *Essay* 2.4.1.

¹¹⁸ "The Mind" #61, 377.

¹¹⁹ Edwards never devoted significant time to expounding upon his immaterialism, which accounts for the fact that no one suspected him of idealism until 1830, when his notes on the mind appeared (Wallace Anderson, "Immaterialism in Jonathan Edwards' Early Philosophical Notes," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 15 [1964] 181).

¹²⁰ "The Mind," #61, 376–377.

However, this is where the commonality ends. Edwards opposed Locke's belief in inert and lifeless matter. Bodies are essentially solid, which means they have the power to resist motion. This resistance, however, requires an acting agent—namely a spirit. This means that a body is simply the immediate effect of an “intelligent and voluntary” being—namely God.¹²¹

In his “Things to be Considered,” Edwards objects to the Hobbesian notion of God as matter, a view similar to Tertullian's notion that if something was not corporeal, it does not exist. For Hobbes, all substance is matter. But Edwards not only argued against divine corporealism (“nothing that is matter can possibly be God”). He went further to endorse an immaterialist thesis: “no matter is, in the most proper sense, matter.”¹²² For Edwards the material universe “exists nowhere but in the mind.”¹²³ The existence of the material universe is “absolutely dependent on idea.”¹²⁴

Going yet further, Edwards writes about space in a manner quite different from, say, Leibniz, who had taken space as being relational (i.e. dependent upon objects for its existence—that is, space has to do with in-betweenness), as well as from Locke and Newton, who viewed space as absolute (i.e. as a self-subsistent substance). By contrast, Edwards, who defines space as “this necessary, eternal, infinite and omnipresent being,” sees it as mental and speaks plainly about what he means by space—namely that space is God. Moreover, Edwards says that “all the space there [that] is not proper to body, all the space there [that] is without the bounds of the creation, all the space there [that] was before creation, is God himself.”¹²⁵

This identification of God and space was certainly not original with Edwards. The Cambridge Platonists, who may well have influenced his thinking in this regard, viewed space as a dynamic principle that operated as the divine instrument; at times, they even went farther by equating God himself with space or the void.¹²⁶ This influence is apparent in the very wording that Edwards uses. Edwards begins his “On Atoms” by declaring that “All bodies whatsoever, except atoms themselves, must be composed of atoms, or of bodies that are *indiscernible*, that cannot be made less, or whose parts cannot be . . . separated one from another.”¹²⁷ The word “indiscernible” was taken from Henry More's *Immortality of the Soul*. This word is rarely used outside of More's writings in the literature of the day. The fact that More furnished Edwards with “both the basic form and much of the materials of his reasoning”¹²⁸ reinforces Fiering's argument that Edwards was exposed to numerous theological and philosophical ideas and schools of thought, not simply the narrow world of Newton and Locke.

¹²¹ *Ibid.* #61, 377.

¹²² “Things to be Considered” #26, 235.

¹²³ “The Mind” #34, 353.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ “Of Being” 203.

¹²⁶ George Rupp, “The ‘Idealism’ of Jonathan Edwards,” *Harvard Theological Review* 62 (1969) 210. See also Anderson, “Immaterialism in Jonathan Edwards” 184–186.

¹²⁷ “On Atoms” *Prop.* 1, 208.

¹²⁸ Anderson, “Immaterialism in Jonathan Edwards” 184.

More significant to our discussion is that Edwards's view of God as the ideal system of space most closely resembles Malebranche. God "contains bodies within Him in an intelligible way," Malebranche argues.¹²⁹ God is infinite "intelligible extension." What we perceive is due to God's immediate uniting of our minds to parts of that intelligible extension and producing in us sensations of sensible qualities that make parts of intelligible extension visible to us.¹³⁰

Because God is coextensive with all reality, the ontological status that finite beings have is derived from that divine reality.¹³¹ Early on in his intellectual career, Edwards argues for this position—for example, concerning atoms in "Of Being." An atom's size is not what is essential to it, but rather that it cannot be "broken" without being annihilated. Thus, an atom has solidity. Edwards's argument goes on to say that only an infinite power can sustain these indivisible solids in being.

Perry Miller is certainly correct in pointing out Edwards's idealism (or immaterialism). He remarks that when Edwards's "Notes" appeared in 1830, it revealed that America had had a "pioneer 'idealist.'"¹³² Edwards saw the world as dependent on the mind for its existence, which led him to draw the conclusion that "the entire universe exists in the divine idea."¹³³ But these notions are quite removed from Locke. In fact, the differences between Edwards and Locke on this matter (or, I should say, *non-matter!*) are far more pronounced than their similarities. Both the notions that the world depends upon the mind for its existence and that the universe exists in the divine idea are Malebranchean. And even if Edwards sides with Locke on the essential solidity of matter (as opposed to its essential extension), both Malebranche and Edwards end up in the immaterialist camp—unlike Locke.

It becomes apparent that all of these five themes listed above cohere very closely to one another in Edwards's metaphysical system. For instance, there is an intimate connection between the affirmation of God's total sovereignty and the doctrine of occasionalism, in which God is continually creating the world. The rejection of the Cartesian notion of matter as extension in favor of matter as solidity—which is continually sustained by God—is closely linked to total sovereignty and continual creation, which ends up closely resembling Malebranche anyway. Moreover, as noted above, the notion of teleology is linked very closely with the neoplatonic hierarchy. This is especially evident in the usage of terms such as "harmony," "consent," "union," "agreement," and the like. In general, these five themes—with their implications—bear out the fact that Edwards's metaphysical system compares far more closely with Malebranche's than with Locke's.

¹²⁹ Malebranche, *The Search After Truth* Elucidation #10, Reply to 2nd Objection, 624; see also Reply to 3rd Objection, 626–628.

¹³⁰ See McCracken, *Malebranche and British Philosophy* 335–336 for a summary of Edwards's similarities to Malebranche and his divergences from him.

¹³¹ Rupp, "'Idealism' of Jonathan Edwards" 214.

¹³² Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* 61.

¹³³ *Ibid.* 63.

IV. CONCLUSION

It seems clear to me that at the most significant points, Edwards agrees with Malebranchean views and is at odds with Locke. And while Locke may have proved to be something of an influence on Edwards, it appears that Edwards, while certainly using Locke's terminology (e.g. the taste of honey or the sight of the color red), diverges more than he agrees. This is not to say, on the other hand, that Edwards parrots Malebranche's views. Edwards was certainly a creative thinker who was not confined in his ideas by those who had gone before him.

The impact of Malebranche on Edwards, even if indirect, seems clear enough. On balance, then, Malebranche appears to have had a much more profound effect on Edwards's metaphysics than Locke did. Regarding the Lockean-influence thesis, I cite Fiering in closing: "That Edwards studied Locke's *Essay* closely, was stimulated by it, and learned from it is not at issue. But the notion that the *Essay* played a key functional role in the development of Edwards's metaphysics is not sustainable."¹³⁴

¹³⁴ Fiering, "The Rationalist Foundations of Jonathan Edwards's Metaphysics" 92. David Brand characterizes Perry Miller's Lockean-influence hypothesis as a "gross distortion"; Miller, he claims, "let his imagination run wildly, depicting Edwards as a sensationist who was thoroughly committed to Lockean principles of empirical psychology" (Brand, *Profile of the Last Puritan* 43). — I would like to thank Patrick Casey for his suggestion to write on this topic.