

THE FOUR FACES OF SELF-LOVE IN THE THEOLOGY OF JONATHAN EDWARDS

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Psychology has become a prevailing interest for many people. Japan is no exception. Catering to the current trend, our university has two distinct psychology departments, to one of which I belong. The Christian world also is often swept up in this trend, to such an extent that psychology sometimes eclipses theology. David Wells chronicles and analyzes this situation in his insightful work *No Place for Truth, or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?*, where he remarks that in the U.S. “evangelicalism has become simply one more expression of the self-movement.”¹ He describes the modern attitude as a kind of “self-piety” that replaces a faith oriented around God. Self is the new focus and organizing principle for faith.² Wells’s book, published in 1993, was also prophetic in that it diagnosed the *Zeitgeist* that would later give birth to very popular religious books and movements oriented toward self-fulfillment, the most prominent being *The Purpose-Driven Life*, which leads the reader on a journey of self-discovery involving God.³

The ethical reflection of eighteenth-century theology and philosophy addresses this issue. The nature and ethical status of self-love were probably investigated more profoundly than at any other time in history. As Fiering puts it, the subject “had been so thoroughly analyzed . . . [that] almost nothing more could be said about it.”⁴ Among the many insightful ethical writers of that era, perhaps none was more penetrating than the American theologian Jonathan Edwards. In his thought psychology was always subservient to theology. Yet paradoxically, his whole life was marked by meditation on the inner self.⁵ Beginning from an ethical system that was

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¹ David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth, or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 140.

² *Ibid.* 137–86.

³ Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002). An excellent critique of Warren’s thought can be found in Bob DeWaay, *Redefining Christianity: Understanding the Purpose-Driven Movement* (Springfield, MO: 21st Century Press, 2006).

⁴ Norman Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Thought in its British Context* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1981) 151.

⁵ William J. Sheick, “Family, Conversion, and the Self in Jonathan Edwards’s *A Faithful Narrative of The Surprising Work of God*,” in *Tennessee Studies in Literature* 18 (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1973) 87.

radically theocentric, Edwards nonetheless made many critical observations on the nature and merits of self-regard. On the basis of that analysis he drew out practical implications for evaluating religious experience and moral virtue. His analyses shed new light on the sanguine views of the humanists of that day, challenging their conclusions about innate human goodness. Fiering sums up Edwards's contribution to the ethical discussion: "He greatly devaluated the currency of everyday morality, which is always subject to the inflationary forces of pride, self-righteousness, and complacency. . . . He pushed the measure of true value up to the skies and exposed the average social coinage for what it is: mostly vanity interlarded with a few God-given instincts."⁶

This paper will set forth Edwards's description of self-love against the background of current trends and thinking on the topic. Edwards saw that proper definition and understanding of self-love were essential to avoiding the many pitfalls of religious self-delusion and moral self-righteousness. In this article we will look first at the eighteenth-century controversy about the relationship of self-love to morality and how Edwards fits into that discussion. Then we will explore the various types of self-love identified by Edwards, both divine and human. Finally, we will contrast these insights with the mindset of much of the present Christian scene, leading to some practical implications. I hope to show that Edwards's theological psychology is a healthy antidote to various harmful effects of the wrong kind of preoccupation with self.

I. EDWARDS IN THE CONTEXT OF HIS TIME: THE SELF-LOVE ISSUE

Eighteenth century ethical philosophers such as Hutcheson, Hume, and the Earl of Shaftsbury pioneered a fundamental reorientation in thinking about morality. Instead of treating it primarily as a logical concern, they accorded much more weight to the emotional side of ethics. They recognized that in everyday life people make ethical judgments and perform ethical acts largely on the basis of moral sentiments, not just implementing the end products of a process of reasoning. Usually known as the "benevolists," their philosophical project in general seems to have been proving the innately moral bent of human beings. Edwards imbibed many of their insights while rejecting a lot of their optimism and humanism. In contrast to the modern scene, eighteenth-century thinkers, including Edwards, generally did not see self-love as a virtuous attribute of human psychology.⁷ While they often

⁶ Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought* 361.

⁷ Modern-day psychologists and sociologists have also remarked on the absence of empirical support for the benefits of promoting self-esteem. After extensively examining relevant research literature on the topic involving criminals, three researchers in the *Psychological Review* concluded that violence is very often the way that people with irrationally high self-esteem respond to those who do not endorse their high opinion of themselves (R. Baumeister, L. Smart, and J. Boden, "Relation of Threatened Egotism to Violence and Aggression: The Dark Side of Self-Esteem," *Psychological Review* 103/1, [1996] 5–33). Furthermore, Hewitt, a sociologist, mentions how the California

minimized the role of self-love in moral behavior, Edwards saw a wide-ranging role for it. Yet he did not reject self-love as inherently evil.

Besides the benevolists, Puritan and other Christian reflection on self-love in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries also provided important influences on Edwards's thought. Catholic mystics such as Madam Guyon were often inclined to aim at annihilating self-love in the pursuit of union with the divine. More philosophically-inclined Catholic thinkers such as Fenelon and Pascal also saw self-love as evil.⁸ Some Puritans took a similar view, but others, such as Thomas Watson and John Cotton, maintained that self-love could also be a natural and necessary attribute of human behavior. In this they were following in the Augustinian tradition of pleasurable spirituality.⁹ Samuel Hopkins, Edwards's most devoted disciple, came to take the most extreme view, holding that a saint must be willing to be damned for the glory of God, a view Edwards himself had explicitly rejected as self-contradictory and unbiblical. Along with Hopkins, others in the Puritan tradition looked at self-love under the critical microscope of religious introspection, looking for signs of authentic conversion, or else hypocrisy.¹⁰ Edwards had the same agenda but came up with less cynical and demanding conclusions than his disciple.

II. DIVINE SELF-LOVE

However, Hopkins had it right about whose glory was the most important. In Edwards's thought, God's self-love trumps all other loves and lays the groundwork for evaluating their worth. Indeed, to his way of thinking, God's self-love is the single most powerful operating principle in the universe. It is the key to unlocking the meaning of all existence, a point that Edwards expands at length in one of his final works, *The End for Which God Created the World*, which Piper renames *God's Passion for his Glory*, using the language of ardor.¹¹ In this work Edwards expounds how God's glorification of himself is the ultimate purpose of everything, with all other goals subordinate to this goal. In fact, his love toward his creatures is finally reducible to self-love, as Edwards explains in Miscellany 679: "All God's love may be resolved into his love to himself and delight in himself, as asserted in my Discourse on the Trinity. His love to the creature is only his inclination to glorify himself and communicate him [self], and his delight in himself glorified and in himself communicated."¹² The preeminence of God's self-love in Edwards's

Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility, established in 1986, failed to come up with significant evidence for the benefits of self-esteem even after extensive research. See John Hewitt, *The Myth of Self-Esteem* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998) 59–60.

⁸ Stephen Post, *Christian Love and Self-Denial: An Historical and Normative Study of Edwards, Samuel Hopkins, and American Theological Ethics* (Lanham, MD: University Press, 1987) 12–13.

⁹ *Ibid.* 13–27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 27–33.

¹¹ John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998).

¹² Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 18: *The "Miscellanies" 501–832* (ed. Ava Chamberlain; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) 239.

schema has both ontological and moral grounds. As the creative source and continual support of all existence, God himself naturally deserves the pre-eminent place of affection. Furthermore, as the most ethically worthy entity, God calls for the expression of ultimate affection, even from himself. So it would be unjust and unworthy of God to relegate himself to an inferior place.

His reference to the Trinity directs us to some essential aspects of this self-love that clear up potential misunderstandings about its nature. For one thing, this self-love is not isolated and narcissistic but communal and social. Within the persons of the Trinity this love is expressed, and they are a kind of divine community, as it were. In addition, this triune God is continually in communication with his creation in the most intimate sense, so his self-love is continually expressed in relationship to those beings. When God shows benevolent concern for them, it is part and parcel of his self-love, since they all exist through him, and his own goodness appears in them.¹³

At the same time, it would be a mistake to view divine self-love as co-extensive with love for his creation and its human world. His preeminent concern for his own self guarantees his total independence from human beings for his happiness. Human happiness is not his highest priority; his own glory is. Edwards finds abundant scriptural support for this assertion in a multitude of biblical passages such as the ones that explicitly speak of God acting for his own name and glory rather than for the sake of the welfare of the people involved.¹⁴ God's expression of his retributive justice is a kind of benevolence to himself, entirely appropriate in the divine Being.¹⁵ Edwards explains the suitability of this:

One way that the excellency of God's nature appears is in loving himself, or loving his own excellency and infinite perfection; and as he loves his own perfection, so he loves the effulgence or shining forth of that perfection. . . . Thus, 'tis an excellent thing that infinite justice should shine forth, and be expressed in infinitely just and righteous acts.¹⁶

This infinite justice manifests itself most dramatically, of course, in hell, where God most clearly shows the disjunction of divine and human interests.¹⁷ In his chapter on "Hell and the Humanitarians," Fiering traces a lot of Edwards's apology for hell to concerns raised by ethicists such as Hutcheson. They felt uncomfortable with a deity who was not ethical in humanistic terms, so they objected to hell on moral grounds.¹⁸ Their assumptions about God and

¹³ Post, *Christian Love* 37–55.

¹⁴ Piper, *God's Passion* 183–251.

¹⁵ Clyde A. Holbrook, *The Ethics of Jonathan Edwards* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1973) 189.

¹⁶ Edwards, *Works* 18, 282.

¹⁷ I explain how Edwards argues that hell is consistent with God's justice and mercy in "Reasonable Damnation: How Jonathan Edwards Argued for the Rationality of Hell," *JETS* 38 (1995) 47–56. For a good summary of how Edwards saw God's benevolence displayed even in his justice, see also William Breitenbach, "Piety and Moralism: Edwards and the New Divinity," in *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience* (ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Harry S. Stout; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 189.

¹⁸ Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought* 201–60.

people were obviously different from Edwards's. Edwards saw a danger in the humanization of God in the writings of the ethicists of his day. At the same time, he maintained that God has a deep concern for human well-being. God's self-love takes into his trinitarian embrace humanity and his creation in redemptive grace and in common grace, which reveals itself very often in the practical results of human self-love.

Edwards sees God as having the right order of priorities in his own affections, placing himself appropriately at the head. Therefore he becomes "a model of proper self-love" to humanity as well.¹⁹ Even more important in Edwards's ethical analysis, the overwhelming primacy of the love of God implies that any system of moral values that does not revolve around love for God is fatally deficient and finally barren of any real virtue. He develops this concept in the companion piece to *The End for Which God Created the World*, named *The Nature of True Virtue*. So God's self-love is a pivotal concept in Edwards's moral theology.

III. THE FOUR MODES OF HUMAN SELF-LOVE

Beneath Edwards's thinking about both divine and human self-love lies his concept of love. Edwards defined love more as the experience of communion with others than as self-sacrifice and self-giving.²⁰ It is not unilateral or individualistic but seeks out relationship and union with the beloved, along with a "desire for the good of the beloved."²¹ Love has both elements of "benevolence," which is the desire for the well-being of the object of one's affections, and "complacency," which is one's pleasure in the object itself. As a result, Edwards had some doubts about the propriety of even talking about natural "self-love," since for him love by definition looks outward for this kind of other-directed experience. Even within the divine Being, it is other-directed. But for the sake of discussion he adopted the common way of speaking about "self-love." However, he was careful to distinguish various senses in which self-love could be experienced. A lot of confusion can result from confusing various ways in which self-love can be defined. This has often been true in modern discussions of self-love and self-esteem.²²

In Edwards's theology, divine self-love was the key to analyzing and assessing human self-love, which since the entrance of sin had become a complicated, multi-faceted affair, with both positive and negative modes of being. In particular, he saw four basic types of self-love, which can be labeled

¹⁹ Ibid. 154.

²⁰ Post, *Christian Love* 37–54. William J. Danaher, Jr., *The Trinitarian Ethics of Jonathan Edwards* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 71–94.

²¹ Danaher, *The Trinitarian Ethics* 71.

²² Hewitt discusses the equivocation and confusion resulting from the various senses in which self-love and self-esteem are often discussed in secular literature. He concludes that in modern lingo the terms usually refer to a kind of "mental mood" of self-approbation (*The Myth of Self-Esteem* 126–29). Paul Brownback makes the same point in the context of Christianity (*The Danger of Self-Love* [Chicago: Moody, 1982] 39–48).

(1) Natural or “simple” self-love; (2) “Compounded” self-love, which is the social face of self-love; (3) Fallen, restricted self-love; and (4) Sanctified self-love, which I will call “godly self-respect.” Of course, all four can be intertwined in complex ways in actual experience, but all manifestations of self-love in Edwards’s thought can be reduced to these four. Both Fiering and Brand find the same four types but place them in a different order, interchanging (2) and (3), leading to some confusion about the ethical status of the four.²³ Brand mistakenly derives compounded self-love from fallen self-love, when it is actually derived from the first type, natural self-love.²⁴ Fiering, on the other hand, misconstrues the fourth type as love for oneself as a creature of God.²⁵ Actually, Edwards had in mind only the gracious self-respect of the regenerate. In any case, all four are linked in complex ways in everyday life, and it is not a case of self-love having multiple-personality disorder.

1. *Natural, “simple” self-love.* This type of self-love is “exceedingly improperly called love,” for the reasons noted above.²⁶ It actually simply means the fundamental orientation toward personal enjoyment and well-being, which exists by a psychological necessity in all people and is the basis for their choices in life. Without it human life could not continue. In Miscellany 530 Edwards elaborates, “Self-love, taken in the most extensive sense, . . . is only a capacity for enjoying and delighting in anything. . . . A desire and delight in God’s good can’t be superior to our love to delight in general . . . a desire of and delight in God’s good is love to God; and love to delight is self-love.”²⁷ So putting love for God and love for self at odds, as the mystical “pure love” advocates did, was creating a false dilemma.

In Post’s view, Edwards probably had various reasons for wanting to establish the legitimacy of this kind of self-love in human motivation. For one thing, much of his Puritan heritage and especially his own maternal grandfather Solomon Stoddard had strongly argued for it. In addition, Edwards experienced suicides in his Northampton congregation that he considered partly the result of the ideal of self-immolating piety. Another important reason was that in Edwards’s soteriological psychology he understood the human will as operating under the impetus of seeking one’s own good, an idea developed at length in his treatise on free will. He also saw in Scripture definite appeals to self-interest such as promises of reward and punishment. Finally, as we have seen, he conceived of God, a good model for human behavior, as happily and righteously self-interested.²⁸

²³ Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Thought* 361. David C. Brand, *Profile of the Last Puritan: Jonathan Edwards, Self-Love, and the Dawn of the Beatific* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991) 71–72.

²⁴ Brand, *Profile of the Last Puritan* 71.

²⁵ Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Thought* 160.

²⁶ Jonathan Edwards, “Notes on the Mind,” quoted in Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Thought* 153.

²⁷ Edwards, *Works* 18, 73.

²⁸ Post, *Christian Love* 38–39.

Edwards comments in one sermon that in one sense the wicked do not really love themselves enough because they reject God's offer of grace and mercy. In another sense they also are too much in love with themselves, with restricted self-love, type (3). However, Edwards viewed the attempt to demonize or destroy natural self-love as an irrational, destructive, futile, and most importantly, unbiblical project. At the same time, he acknowledged that this type of undiluted, natural self-concern no longer actually exists entirely distinct from its corrupted mutation, fallen self-love.²⁹

2. *Social self-love.* In a world of constantly interacting beings self-love rarely exists in isolation. Normally, the human being reaches out to embrace others in affection and concern and does not remain self-absorbed. What do we make of this natural interest in others in evaluating the ethical nature of mankind? Debate raged in the eighteenth century over whether other-directed concern was simply self-interest appearing in another shape or was an evidence of real virtue. Hobbes had maintained the former, and Hutcheson, Hume, and the Earl of Shaftesbury the latter. From the point of view of men such as Hutcheson and Shaftesbury, any connection with self-love disqualified other-love as virtuous. Edwards took a somewhat different position.

In Edwards's analysis, compounded self-love is natural self-love expanding out beyond its own restricted sphere to include other beings connected somehow with the self. Whereas Hutcheson and the Earl of Shaftesbury considered concern for the welfare of others to be evidence of an innate moral sense showing basic human goodness, Edwards believed that "a natural [man] may love others, but 'tis someway or other as appendages and appurtenances to himself. But a spiritual man loves others as of God, or in God, or some way related to him."³⁰ In other words, by association with oneself other people also become objects of affection and benevolence. This happens as a result of certain supplementary psychological mechanisms operating alongside self-love, such as instinctual family feelings, sexual attraction, conscience, or various other emotions or mental associations.³¹ The benevolists considered such things to be the products of unrelated personality components, but Edwards saw unmistakable ties to self-love. The evidence for this is in the selective interest of the person, whose love only fixes upon objects with some kind of tie to oneself—one's family, clan, city, school, or nation, for instance. Even universal concern for mankind in general is based on identification with them as fellow humans like oneself. Pity for the suffering Edwards saw as based on a perception of their unhappiness relative to one's own.³²

Nevertheless, Edwards did not view this kind of particular, selective interest as necessarily something evil. It functions as effective "social glue,"

²⁹ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8: *Ethical Writings* (ed. Paul Ramsey; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 254–59.

³⁰ Edwards, *Works* 18, 533.

³¹ Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought* 158.

³² *Ibid.* 255.

a part of God's gracious constitution of human society by common grace for the preservation and well-being of mankind in a fallen world. Otherwise, the world would degenerate into universal conflict and chaos. It is perfectly acceptable and healthy to have these preferential interests; indeed, Scripture condemns those who do not take care of the welfare of their relatives (1 Tim 5:8). However, Edwards did not judge this outgrowth of self-love to be real moral virtue. The only real virtue is universal concern centering on God himself and his overall system of existence, which Edwards dubs "benevolence to Being" in *The Nature of True Virtue*. In fact, in so far as any limited benevolent concern detracted or distracted people from universal benevolence, it had pernicious tendencies. Fiering sums up Edwards's perspective:

Particular loves, according to Edwards's thinking, do not merge into authentic general love; they are its enemies. . . . True virtue stands against the parochiality of the world, the comforting alliance of like souls and common blood. This parochiality is exposed as opposition to God's demand upon man to turn his back on mother and father and to love from heaven down.³³

Certainly family blood feuds, nationalistic wars, political infighting, sports hooliganism, and various other forms of party conflict attest to the dark potential of compounded self-love perverted by sin, but Edwards perceived a problem in a hypothetical world of universal brotherhood without God at the center of it. Even such a world of universal peace, happiness, and harmony would be horribly sinful without God at the hub: "If there could be an instinct or other cause [like self-love] determining a person to benevolence towards the whole world of mankind . . . exclusive of . . . love to God . . . [and] supreme regard to him . . . it cannot be of the nature of true virtue."³⁴ Thus, in this extreme hypothetical scenario Edwards exposes the bankruptcy of mere humanitarianism as a yardstick for measuring true moral worth.

3. *Sinful self-love.* This brings us to the heart of Edwards's analysis of human self-love: his examination of the relationship between self-love and sin. Not only was self-love lacking in positive virtue, it had an inevitable tendency toward evil in a fallen world. Before the first sin, the love of God broadened the self-love in the human heart to take in all of existence and most of all God himself.³⁵ The fall of man, rather than introducing a new principle of evil into the human world, simply removed supreme love to God, resulting in self-love freed from divine restraint. Sin was the natural result.³⁶ Edwards explains:

³³ Ibid. 195–96.

³⁴ Edwards, *Works* 8, 602–3.

³⁵ Ibid. 253.

³⁶ Actually, there is a great deal of inconsistency in Edwards's account of the fall as it relates to self-love and the love of God. Sometimes he appears to have God removing the principle of love for God from mankind before the fall, and at other times he says that God removed this principle after the fall. Trying to account for original sin involved Edwards in a number of conundrums and self-contradictions. Paul Helm probes this problem in Edwards's thought in "The Great Christian Doctrine (Original Sin)," found in *A God Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards* (ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor; Wheaton: Crossway, 2004) 175–200.

Mere self-love, if it be the sole governing principle in the heart and without restraint, will dispose one to delight in another's misery, because self-love seeks its own comparative happiness. . . . Self-love will delight in cruelty and putting others to pain, because it appears to it as an exercise of power. . . . If there be only self-love that bears rule, it will be contented with nothing short of the throne of God.³⁷

What was once a wholesome natural principle has mutated into a kind of cancer. Indeed, in Miscellany 1010 he elaborates that "the predominance of self-love is the foundation of all sin," while love to God is the origin of all righteousness.³⁸ As one Edwards sermon title puts it, the result of sinful self-love is that "The Nature of Man is So Corrupted He is Become a Very Evil and Hurtful Creature."³⁹ Without regenerating grace, moral and religious efforts, no matter how earnest, are utterly powerless to remedy this condition, because they only leave the centrality of self-love in place in the human psyche, and all these efforts inevitably proceed from it. The result is self-idolatry and hypocrisy: "If men do great things and suffer great things merely out of self-love, that is but to offer to themselves which is due to God, so making an idol of themselves."⁴⁰

Of greatest concern to Edwards was the subtle danger of counterfeit religious experience arising from some form of self-love disguising itself as piety. In *A Treatise on the Religious Affections*, Edwards zeroes in on the motivation behind the spurious convert as opposed to that of the true saint. The emotional attachment of the hypocrite springs initially from self-love and the thought that God is so interested in him:

The [hypocrite] rejoices in himself; self is the first foundation of his joy: the [true saint] rejoices in God. . . . True saints have their minds, in the first place, inexpressibly pleased and delighted with the sweet ideas of the glorious and amiable nature of the things of God. . . . But the dependence of the affections of hypocrites is in a contrary order: they first rejoice . . . that they are made so much of by God; and then on that ground, he seems in a sort, lovely to them.⁴¹

By "in a sort" Edwards means that it is not God himself that they love; it is the attitude they conceive that God has toward them and all that he can do for them. As Holbrook puts it, their thinking is merely *utilitarian*: What can God do for me?⁴² If he can meet my "felt needs," in modern parlance, then so much the better for God. If not, then God is irrelevant. In the realm of human relationships, if we get the impression we are only being used by someone who shows no real interest in who we are or what we care about, then we naturally conclude that this person does not really love us. The same

³⁷ Edwards, *Works* 18, 78.

³⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 20: *The "Miscellanies" 833–1152* (ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) 342.

³⁹ Jonathan Edwards, *Knowing the Heart: Jonathan Edwards on True and False Conversion* (ed. William Nichols; Ames, IA: International Outreach, 2003) 95–113.

⁴⁰ Edwards, *Works* 8, 181.

⁴¹ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2: *Religious Affections* (ed. John E. Smith; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959) 249–50.

⁴² Holbrook, *The Ethics of Jonathan Edwards* 7.

would be true for God. Edwards sees biblical support for this idea in Satan's accusation about the utilitarian nature of Job's faith: "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (Job 1:9–10).⁴³

Like Jesus, Edwards sees the religious hypocrite as the most reprehensible and dangerous type of sinner, literally an unbalanced monster.⁴⁴ His hypocrisy will often reveal itself in his concept of God because self-love will reject aspects of God that do not serve self-interest. Divine wrath, justice, sovereignty, majesty, and holiness are not useful, so these aspects of God become superfluous. Hypocrites often develop "a false notion of God . . . ; as though he were only goodness and mercy, and no revenging justice; or as though the exercise of his goodness were necessary, and not free and sovereign; or as though his goodness were dependent on what is in them, and as it were constrained by them."⁴⁵ In other words, the faith arising out of self-love will be a kind of idolatry, worshipping a god of the self's imagination. The fact that hypocrites experience the warmth of affection toward this image of God proves nothing about the reality of their faith:

Self-love may be the foundation of an affection toward God, through a great insensibility of their state with regard to God, and for want of conviction of conscience to make 'em sensible how dreadfully they have provoked God to anger; they have no sense of the heinousness of sin, as against God . . . and so having formed in their minds such a God as suits them, and thinking God to be such a one as themselves, who favors and agrees with them, they may like him very well.⁴⁶

Thinking that God smiles upon them and thinks little of their sin, they can smile upon God. In contrast, "the saints' affections begin with God," with his complete biblically-revealed character and attributes, even the ones that can provoke fear.⁴⁷ In particular, God's holiness is the attribute that makes him beautiful in the eyes of real believers, inspiring their adoration. Edwards defines holiness as the "moral excellency" of God.⁴⁸ For the self-love inspired religious hypocrite, God's holiness holds no particular attraction.

4. *Sanctified self-love: godly self-respect.* Interestingly, Edwards did not identify evil self-love with pride. He recognized that, like the term "self-love" itself, the word "pride" can be used in both good and bad senses. He saw nothing evil in the pursuit of greater individual excellence or achievement. He saw the evil in the comparative aspect of pride: "Pride is something diverse from self-love, as we use the word in a bad sense for selfish love. . . . Pride may be thus defined: it is that habit or state of a person's heart whereby he is inordinately disposed to exaltation among other beings

⁴³ Edwards, *Works* 2, 242.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 365–75.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 244.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 245.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 247.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 253–66.

as to his comparative dignity, or worthiness of esteem or value.⁴⁹ In his sermon “Man Is Naturally a Proud Creature,” Edwards also calls this problem “self-conceit,” a term which bears some resemblance to the currently fashionable one “self-esteem.” Self-conceit is the product of corrupted self-love and means “man’s exalting himself in his own thoughts of his present honor or worthiness. Men through their pride behold them[selves] in a magnifying glass. They look upon themselves as . . . more worthy of esteem than they are, and are blind to those things which are their own faults.”⁵⁰ This pride appears in human rivalry and competition for status, but Edwards saw this pride most in evidence when a human being refuses to humble himself before the infinitely great deity, to “bow in the dust” before his majesty, which Edwards constantly maintained was the only appropriate attitude toward the Creator. Edwards expounds at length on the necessity of this experience, which he calls “evangelical humiliation,” in *A Treatise on the Religious Affections*.⁵¹ Nevertheless, it is no sin to pursue as much inherent honor and dignity as a person can.

So once again Edwards goes beyond the bounds of simplistic and conventional thinking. He is setting the stage for describing a kind of “godly self-respect” based on the regenerate person’s standing in the eyes of God through salvation in Christ. Unlike the pure-love advocates, Edwards’s solution to the problem of sinful self-love is not to eliminate self-love. As Piper explains him, Edwards “did not kill self-love; he supernaturally and profoundly transformed it into a spiritual hunger for the glory of God.”⁵² To the meek hungering for God, Edwards asserted that God graciously granted by faith an exalted status. Paradoxically the saint experiences this elevation by God simultaneously with his voluntary self-abasement before him. This concept seems to echo the experience of the elders who lay down their crowns before God in Scripture (Rev 4:10). In the kingdom of God one can be both a king and a humble subject at the same time.

According to Edwards, this experience of personal worth is only available to the redeemed. Both Fiering and Noll appear to misunderstand the fourth type of self-love in Edwards, which they link to mankind’s created worth in the image of God. Fiering says it is “measured and proportional esteem for oneself in the relation to the created universe of goods, whereby one loves oneself as a creature of God.”⁵³ Similarly, Noll maintains that Edwards thinks that “humanity is valuable, and that humans may even love themselves

⁴⁹ Edwards, *Works* 20, 208.

⁵⁰ Edwards, *Knowing the Heart* 60. Social psychological research has largely confirmed Edwards’s (and the Bible’s) view of prideful self-deception. Experimental studies have consistently shown that self-serving bias warps judgments and causes people to cling stubbornly to irrational beliefs even in the face of massive evidence to the contrary. A good summary of some of this research and its implications can be found in David Myers, *The Inflated Self: Human Illusions and the Biblical Call to Hope* (New York: Seabury, 1980) 20–32.

⁵¹ Edwards, *Works* 2, 311–40.

⁵² Piper, *God’s Passion* 112.

⁵³ Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Thought* 160.

because God . . . values and loves human beings."⁵⁴ However, this interpretation is difficult to square with the theology of a man who penned a sermon named "Wicked Men Useful in Their Destruction Only." There he maintains that from God's point of view the unregenerate have value only as fodder for the eternal fire, object lessons displaying and glorifying divine justice, majesty, power, and wrath.⁵⁵ Commenting on Fiering's view, Brand comes closer to the truth in admitting that "it is doubtful whether Edwards acknowledged anything amiable in man in his natural state apart from God's grace."⁵⁶

However, Edwards could even rhapsodize about the newfound sense of worth of the redeemed saint. He once preached from the pulpit: "What a sweet calmness, what a calm ecstasy, doth it bring to the soul! How doth it make the soul [to] love itself."⁵⁷ That dignity comes completely from a new relationship to God through redemption. As Edwards exclaimed in another sermon, "How hath he honored us, in that he hath made us to glorify him to all eternity! How are we dignified by our Maker, who has made us for so high and excellent an end!"⁵⁸ It is good to set these expressions alongside Edwards's well-known and equally poetic descriptions of human wickedness. For Edwards, human fallenness is not the end of the story about human worth.

IV. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The subtlety, complexity, and sophistication of Edwards's thinking about self-love and self-esteem are a wholesome remedy to the simplistic thinking in much of current secular and religious literature. For one thing, modern discussions of self-love and self-esteem often confuse the various senses in which these terms can be understood. Edwards shows us the necessity of making careful distinctions. A lot of modern treatments also reduce a complex issue to the false dilemma of choosing between self-hatred and self-esteem. Edwards shows us a multitude of alternatives in the combinations of four different possible modes of self-love, which can be healthy or dangerous to varying degrees. Furthermore, he demonstrates that human psychology can accommodate both self-abasement and a sense of dignity at the same time through the operation of God's grace, which seems impossible to the modern mind. His analysis of self-love has far-reaching implications.

⁵⁴ Mark Noll, "God at the Center: Jonathan Edwards on True Virtue," *The Christian Century* (Sept. 8–13, 1993) 857.

⁵⁵ Davidson, "Reasonable Damnation" 52–53. Edwards makes the very same argument in another recently published sermon based on Prov 16:4 named "Wicked Men Answer the End of their Beings in No Other Way But in Their Suffering," found in Jonathan Edwards, *Unless You Repent: Fifteen Previously Unpublished Sermons on the Fate Awaiting the Impenitent* (ed. Don Kistler; Orlando, FL: Soli Deo Gloria, 2005) 53–62.

⁵⁶ Brand, *Profile of the Last Puritan* 73.

⁵⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 10: *Sermons and Discourses 1720–1723* (ed. Wilson H. Kimnach; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 479.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 427.

The dangers of a simplistic dichotomy between self-love and self-hatred are manifold. One is the extreme represented by the pure-love advocates such as Samuel Hopkins, an inhuman rejection of even natural self-love. In reaction to the errors of modern self-esteem advocates, apologists for the “pure love” of God may appear, expecting a radical denial of legitimate self-interest among people of faith. Even now, some forms of Christian mysticism aim at extinguishing individual consciousness in an experience of the divine. Edwards’s balanced and biblical approach to self-love could provide a helpful corrective to this extreme. On the other hand, he also shows us that the worship of God should not be confused with the pursuit of self-fulfillment. Edwards demonstrates that a religion rooted in self-love will produce a deity who is trivialized. And in fact, the god who appears on the pages of some current religious bestsellers falls short of the awesome biblical God of majesty and holiness. Brand frames the problem well:

Each new generation of the church must become captivated by the beatific or cease to be the church by catering to the secular demands of society. . . . Edwards’s legacy demands that the unsanctified gods of self-love be renounced in the face of the ugly truth of total depravity with its insidious ongoing effects even among the sanctified in this present order. The employment of manipulative tactics stemming from man’s natural craving for power and knowledge must give way to a ministry occupied with the beauty of holiness.⁵⁹

Despite his exhaustive analysis of the topic of self-love, Edwards found no place for a concept of self-esteem based on inherent human worth. As a devoted student of Scripture, it is doubtful he would have overlooked such a significant concept in the Bible. This ought to make us leery of the current obsession with the topic of self-esteem. In fact, Edwards pointed away from this kind of natural self-esteem and instead advocated humbling oneself before God as a sinner, which he believed was a precondition for the experience of godly self-respect. Therefore, those who advise people to downplay personal sin and play up human worth are actually leading people away from the only legitimate experience of self-worth, according to Edwards.

Edwards’s analysis implies that a religious faith oriented primarily toward self-love and self-fulfillment not only demeans God but ultimately also degrades people. This may be its most ironic consequence. A faith based on self-love leads directly to religious hypocrisy, since the desires of the self are now the criteria for evaluating all aspects of religious life. If Edwards could observe the present religious scene, he would warn that any instruction based mainly on an appeal to self-love will produce hypocrites without fail. In a fallen world people are prone to self-deception and living a lie. This tendency can lend credence to a spurious faith that serves mainly egoism. Along with examples of authentic experience in the Great Awakening, Edwards encountered living demonstrations of the harmful results of counterfeit faith. One telltale sign of this counterfeit was a defective theology about the nature of God.

⁵⁹ Brand, *Profile of the Last Puritan* 146–47.

Another realm for the exercise of discernment is ethics. According to Edwards, authentic virtue is the outgrowth only of a truly God-centered psychology. Our lesser values are not necessarily as valuable as we are prone to think they are. At the present time many urge a return to family values and patriotism as pillars of a healthy society. However, Edwards traces much of this apparent virtue to the effects of mere self-concern. Ultimately these are limited interests produced by some connection to oneself, and they can blind us to larger ethical issues. The largest ethical issue is God himself. If zeal for traditional values relegates God to a secondary position, it is not promoting real virtue, according to Edwards. Sometimes the rhetoric of the Religious Right in the U.S. seems to make God a convenient prop for loyalty to the nation or for family life. At the other end of the spectrum are Christian people dedicated to causes such as saving the environment and world peace. These also are limited spheres that cannot contain God and may even transform him into an idol. Nevertheless, Edwards shows that there is a legitimate, biblical role for limited ethical interests in God's economy of common grace, as long as they take their subordinate place in a theocentric outlook and life.

As Post observes, Edwards points us to the fact that it is only in relationship to others, especially God, that the self finds its proper definition and worth.⁶⁰ His grand, unapologetic vision of a God-centered totality of existence elevates the self to unimagined heights. To be embraced by the majestic God of Scripture through faith in Jesus his Son is all the affirmation anyone could desire.

⁶⁰ Post, *Christian Love* 87.