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The Interconnectedness of Jonathan Edwards's Ontology and Trinitarianism

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The Interconnectedness of Jonathan Edwards's Ontology and Trinitarianism

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by

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Abstract

Jonathan Edwards scholarship has been divided in recent years on the correct interpretation of his work. Scholars like Sang Hyun Lee and Amy Plantinga Pauw maintain that Edwards used a radically new dispositional ontology to understand the fundamental realities of nature. Oliver Crisp, Kyle Strobel, and Steve Studebaker have argued that Edwards used an essentialist ontology. I will defend the latter position and explain how it is tied to Edwards's Trinitarianism. I argue for an interpretation of Edwards that situates him in his historical and theological context. The early modern philosophy of his day was marked by essentialist ontology. The Reformed tradition of his day was marked by understanding the Trinity in an orthodox way. I argue that Edwards combined both of these themes in his philosophy and theology. This made for a unique understanding of ontology and Trinitarianism, but Edwards remained within the bounds of the philosophy and theology of his time.

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I. Introduction

Controversy over the proper interpretation of Jonathan Edwards' philosophy and theology has caused recent re-engagement with his thought. Though Edwards is most widely known for his contribution to the First Great Awakening and his famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," his philosophy and theology include much more than this caricature seems to suggest. This woefully narrow selection from his body of work lends to persistent misinterpretations of his work. In fact, he is thought to be the first American philosopher (Wainwright). Edwards scholarship has taken a few major turns. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Edwards was widely read and appreciated (Crisp 10). By the twentieth century, his work was considered embarrassing because of its ties to Reformed/Puritan theology. Consequently, Edwards soon fell out of style. In 1949, however, Perry Miller rescued Edwards from obscurity when he published his biography on him. This reignited interest in Edwards. Miller believed that Edwards was an intellectual genius, hindered by his outdated Puritan theology. This was a common interpretation for the years following the biography. But, Miller's revival in Edwards scholarship led to Yale University publishing Edwards's entire literary work. It was debated whether Edwards was worthy of studying at all, considering his bold theological background. The twenty-first century, like the centuries before, found itself similarly embroiled in controversy over Edwards. This controversy is different, however, in that it is over the proper interpretation of his work.

Sang Hyun Lee wrote *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* in 1988. He interprets Edwards as introducing a radically new ontology that challenged and reconfigured classical theological themes. This interpretation has been adopted by many Edwards scholars. Most notably for this paper is Amy Plantinga Pauw, who understood Edwards's radical ontology

as tied inextricably to his Trinitarianism. As a response to this interpretation, a different view of Edwards has emerged. This view suggests that while Edwards was an original thinker, he did not depart from classical theological norms. Instead, he was simply attempting to explain these themes in an early Enlightenment world. Defenders of this position, such as Oliver Crisp, Kyle Strobel, and Steve Stuebaker, suggest that Edwards did not depart from the essentialist ontology of early modern philosophers.

In this paper, I will be defending the interpretation of Crisp, Strobel, Stuebaker, and others that do not see Edwards as presenting a radically new ontology. I will argue that Edwards is operating within the framework of substance ontology rather than dispositional ontology. This framework helped set the stage for Edwards's doctrine of the Trinity. I argue that we cannot understand his doctrine of the Trinity apart from his essentialist ontology and vice versa. These are essential aspects to understanding the philosophy and theology of Jonathan Edwards. In order to prove this, I will attempt to place Edwards in his right context. I will explain the context and the relevant themes of early modern philosophy. I will demonstrate how Edwards fit neatly into the early modern period by utilizing the same themes throughout his philosophy. Then, I will trace the history of Trinitarian theology to show Edwards also fits neatly into this history. He was an unusual combination of early modern philosophy and strict Reformed/Puritan theology. But, this context sheds light on a proper understanding of his work. It illuminates Edwards as an innovative product of his context.

II. Early Modern Philosophical Context

Modern Philosophy

Before exploring the philosophy of Jonathan Edwards, it is important to understand the philosophical context into which he entered. Not only was Edwards influenced by theology and his desire for maximizing the glory of God, but he was also deeply invested in his Modern philosophical context. Both had a profound effect on his theology and philosophy. The Early Modern period of philosophy is generally considered to have started with René Descartes (1596-1650), spanning the 17th and 18th centuries. Much of modern philosophy comes as a response to the Reformation and the Enlightenment. Prior to the Reformation, Scholasticism was the popular philosophical system of the day. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, “scholasticism remained the dominant European philosophy until the fifteenth century, when it gave way to, in turn, Renaissance humanism, rationalism, and empiricism” (Blackburn 342). It was characterized by Catholicism and the use of the argument from authority, primarily because only a few people had access to the Scriptures. Also, philosophy was somewhat of a collective enterprise, much like the Church. Philosophers were working together and interacting with each other to develop their philosophical positions. In this context, arguments from authority could be seen as appropriate. The Reformation caused a shift in philosophy because it allowed for personal interpretation of the Scriptures. The argument from authority began to hold less weight as more and more people obtained access to the Bible. Descartes’ entrance into the history of philosophy indicates a major shift in philosophical inquiry. He begins his *Meditations* with, “Several years have now passed since I first realized how numerous were the false opinions that in my youth I had taken to be true, and thus how doubtful were all those that I had subsequently built upon them” (Descartes 27). This was drastically different from scholasticism, which was

characterized by the absence of first-person verbiage. Descartes made a clean break from scholastic philosophy and was on the cutting edge of a new era.

One of Descartes's primary preoccupations was the mind-body problem. Descartes's work on this indelibly shaped Modern Philosophy. The problem is summed up in the question: What is the relationship between the mind and the body, or between the physical realm and the mental realm? Almost every Modern philosopher has a proposed solution to this problem. Descartes's answer to this was dualism. He asserted that the mind and body were two distinct substances that interacted by way of the pineal gland. Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) recognized that Descartes had a problem, because the mind and body were still dependent on God, making them unsubstantial in the technical sense. To solve this, Leibniz proposed the existence of monads, which were finite substances. This way, he could account for the mind and body being distinct while maintaining dependence on God. George Berkeley (1685-1753), who came shortly after Descartes and Leibniz, taught idealism as the solution to the mind-body problem. He claimed that only minds and ideas existed. In this way, he did not have to explain the connection between the mind and the body, because the body was just an extension of the mind. Though there were other proposed solutions, these cover the spectrum in Modern philosophy.

This led to an emphasis on substance in Modern philosophy. The Modern philosophical framework was marked by essentialism, which divided everything into substances and modes. Each major Modern philosopher had a particular view on substance: dualism (there are only two substances), monism (there is only one substance), or somewhere in between. Substance was a major topic in the modern philosophical context, beginning with Descartes. Descartes suggested that there are two substances other than God: mind and body. Spinoza noticed a problem with this, because if mind and body were two distinct substances then they could not depend on one

another, but Descartes' conception seemed to overlook that. Spinoza, in turn, suggested that God is the only substance, but sacrificed orthodoxy at this expense. Leibniz attempted to salvage orthodoxy while acknowledging Spinoza's critique of Descartes. Locke was the first Modern philosopher to place less importance on substance by acknowledging that there was something underlying objects, but he knew not what. While substance metaphysics was on the downward trend after Locke, Berkeley and Edwards still had responses to it. Toward the end of this period, substance became less important. Immanuel Kant, thought to be one of the last of the early Modern philosophers, spent little time discussing substance. He was more concerned with saving philosophy from David Hume's undermining of philosophical inquiry. Kant's seeming drift from essentialism marks a break with the predominant framework of Modern philosophy.

Edwards in Modern Philosophy

Jonathan Edwards entered the Early Modern philosophical context. One of the things that makes Edwards unique was his engagement with cutting-edge modern philosophy alongside his theological projects. While there were many religious philosophers in the Modern period, there were not many Reformed, Puritan thinkers as involved in philosophical work as Edwards. He was deeply influenced by Isaac Newton (1642-1727), John Locke (1632-1704), Nicholas Malebranche (1638-1715), and the Cambridge Platonists (17th century).

According to Edwards scholar, Paul Helm, Jonathan Edwards was heavily influenced by John Locke's ideas on the mind. Locke believed that "an idea is the only object of our thinking, none of our ideas are innate, and all [simple ideas] are either ideas of sensation or reflection" (Helm). Ideas of sensation are ideas that we get from external objects. Ideas of reflection refer to ideas about the internal operations of our mind that we perceive or reflect upon. Reflection includes thinking, doubting, reasoning, willing, etc. Ideas of reflection are obtained by the mind

reflecting on its internal operations. Edwards utilizes Locke's concept of ideas of reflection in his treatment of the Trinity. Locke adheres to some form of mind-body dualism, though not without hesitation. He argues that the mind, like the body, is a substratum that is likely unknowable to us, but not unknowable to God. For Locke, the mind's inner structure is unknowable. This structure is what gives us the powers and dispositions of the mind. Locke argues that the will is a power of the mind. Because of this, freedom is a power of the agent rather than a power of a distinct faculty of the will. According to Helm, Edwards relies heavily on this unitary conception of the will in his *Discourse on the Trinity*.

Nicolas Malebranche is another early modern philosopher that influenced Edwards. Jasper Reid asserts that "it is certain that Edwards was aware of Malebranche, and highly likely that he read at least some of his work" (Reid 152). Malebranche was a fundamentally Augustinian philosopher. Influenced by Descartes, Malebranche's Augustinianism was filtered through Cartesian concerns. Two important aspects of Malebranche's philosophy were his adherence to an orthodox account of the Trinity and the methodological primacy of Trinity in his metaphysical system. He understood God to be Being itself and he saw the Second Person of the Trinity as generated by God's own idea of Himself. He affirmed, though, that the Persons of the Trinity were united in essence. They were all the same *substance*, though different Persons. Much of this will sound familiar when we get to Edwards's own account of ontology.

Edwards scholar, Sang Hyun Lee, claims that Edwards proposes a radically new ontological method. He claims that Edwards rejects the substance metaphysics of his time for dispositional ontology. It is important to see where Edwards was in the history of philosophy and whether he created something new or synthesized the different ideas of the time. Edwards was writing in the Newtonian era, immediately after Locke and Hobbes. There were a few

philosophical concerns that a Christian theologian like Edwards would have. One of the main things that Edwards was trying to refute was Hobbes's materialism. Hobbes claimed that all that existed was matter. For Edwards, this was an unorthodox view, because if this was the case, then either God was simply matter or God did not exist. Edwards's polemic against Hobbesian materialism is most likely what led to his radical idealism. Idealism avoids the problem of representational realism without leading to the unorthodox view that everything is matter, because it asserts that all that exists are minds and their ideas. Representational realism was the idea that the only things we can know directly are our own ideas, which, for Edwards, was a problem. If this is the case, then we would have no way of coming to know the external world. For idealists like Edwards and Berkeley, this is not a problem because the only things that truly and properly exist are minds and their ideas. Given Edwards's idealism, his view seems to fit fairly neatly in this modern philosophical context.

Edwards was also concerned with Newtonian science. He was deeply interested in recent scientific discoveries. He sought to make sense of science through his philosophy. This is why he wanted to explain the fundamental building blocks of reality. He wanted to create a strong Christian apology while holding to the new discoveries of the Enlightenment. This is partly why his writings are confusing at times. He was trying to synthesize many different lines of thought into one philosophical theology. Crisp rightly characterizes Edwards as "an intellectual magpie, who sought to synthesize aspects of the early Enlightenment thinking with post-Reformation scholastic metaphysics in order to offer a coherent intellectual apology for traditional Christian doctrine" (Crisp 14). Edwards used the ideas of his day to develop a rational defense of the Reformed Christian faith.

III. Edwards's Ontology

Lee's Interpretation of Edwards's Ontology as Purely Dispositional

The interpretation of Jonathan Edwards's ontology has created something of a difficulty for Edwards scholars, though before Sang Hyun Lee, most believed that Edwards was working in the early modern framework of substances and modes (Crisp 12). In his book, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, Lee proposes a radically new interpretation that suggests that Edwards abandoned the idea of substance for the notion of disposition.

Lee begins his argument by tracing the idea of habit from Aristotle through Aquinas and into Edwards. For Edwards, habit is interchangeable with disposition. The Aristotelian conception of habit is an active and ontologically significant principle. Aquinas amplified the Aristotelian understanding by designating the sanctifying grace as an entitative habit, or a habit that functions on the level of being. For Aquinas, *habitus* can bring a potency to a degree of actuality without giving it full actuality. Lee argues that Edwards's "habit" is Aristotle's *hexis* and Aquinas' *habitus* in new dress. In Locke, habit actually emerges as what is directly responsible for the very presence of relations and order among ideas in the mind. This sets the stage for Edwards's new conception of habit. In traditional metaphysics, habit was only an accidental quality that played an operational role. With Hume and Locke, however, habit could emerge as an ontological principle. It is important to note that in Edwards' time, the concept of substance was undergoing fundamental changes because of Newtonian science and empiricism. Lee is arguing that the ontology that Edwards is putting forward is that the real nature of things in the world is the habitual pattern of relations among ideas.

According to Lee, Edwards's idea of habit is "an active tendency that governs and brings about certain types of events and actions" (Lee 35). Lee explains that Edwards uses this notion of

habit in a radically new way that replaces the concept of substance. Potentiality and activity are being brought into the very inner nature of being rather than simply being operative. With Edwards, “dispositions and habits, conceived as active and ontologically abiding principles play the roles substance and form used to fulfill” (Lee 4). The created world is to be understood as a network of divinely established habits, which can also be referred to as the laws of nature. This means that Edwards believed that the essence of created things is a compound of habits/laws. This would be a form of bundle theory, similar in nature to what Hume proposed. According to Hume, objects are just bundles of attributes. For Edwards (according to Lee), objects are bundles of dispositional attributes. Lee’s view is that Edwards thinks that all the attributes that created beings have are dispositional in nature. Habits do not belong to substances, but are constitutive of their being. Being is essentially dynamic and relational.

This dispositional or habitual ontology is not only in the created order, but also applies to God Himself. According to Lee, Edwards understood God as purely dispositional rather than as substance. Lee draws from Miscellanies No. 107 when Edwards writes that “it is God’s essence to incline to communicate Himself” (Edwards 107). He ties this with a section in Edwards’s *The End for Which God Created the World* where Edwards states that God’s disposition to communicate Himself “is what we must conceive of as being originally in God as a perfection of His nature” (Edwards 207). Lee uses this to conclude that, for Edwards, “God’s disposition to act as God...is the essence of the divine being” (Lee 175).

Oliver Crisp’s Objection to Lee

Oliver Crisp takes issue with this interpretation. He sees Edwards’s ontology as a version of essentialism. Crisp argues that “through a misunderstanding of the way in which [the elements of idealism, mental phenomenalism, and occasionalism] interrelate, Lee ends up with mistaken

views on several important components of Edwards' ontology" (Crisp 2). Crisp is building on the traditional interpretation of Edwards's ontology and offers an account that is able to make sense of Edwards' unusual language, while not requiring Lee's stronger claims. Crisp's account seeks consistency between Edwards's writings and the orthodox Christian views of the time. One of the main points in his argument is that there is a simpler account of Edwards's ontology that is more clearly consistent with the rest of his views. Crisp argues that while Lee's interpretation is impressive and thorough, it is mistaken in its conclusions about Edwards' ontology. Crisp argues in favor of the more traditional interpretation of Edwards that views his ontology as a form of essentialism. Essentialism is basically the doctrine that divides what exists into substances and their modes.

Crisp states that it is fairly common to claim that entities have at least some dispositional attributes, but controversial to claim that *all* the attributes a given agent has are dispositional. This is what makes Lee's account difficult to hold. Crisp argues that one should not attribute obviously problematic views to a particular thinker unless there is very good evidence to do so. Crisp points out that this dispositional account is problematic by giving the example "being human." Being human is not a dispositional property, but it is essential to the existence of a human. With this example, Crisp demonstrates the difficulty of Lee's interpretation in applying purely dispositional attributes to humans and to God. While it could be the case that Edwards held such a problematic view, Crisp reminds us that we must have very good reasons to believe that he did if we are to accept it. Lee's view becomes more problematic according to Crisp when he argues that it is not the case that substances have dispositional habits, but that habits *replace* substance entirely.

Crisp boils down Lee's interpretation into three main points:

1. All created beings are nothing more than bundles of attributes, ontologically.
2. There is no material or immaterial substratum upholding the attribute bundles.
3. All attribute bundles are upheld by the immediate exercise of divine power.

Crisp adds a fourth point to this, because there is ample evidence to believe that Edwards believed that God is the only true substance. This fourth point would be, “The only true substance is the divine substance, which upholds all created beings” (Crisp 7). This point is consistent with essentialism, and it does not appear to have a place in Lee’s view. Lee’s claim that God is essentially a disposition, rather than a substance, is inconsistent with Edwards’s claim that God is the only true substance. Lee wants to account for change in Edwards’s view and claims that while Edwards may have started out with idealism, he moved toward a dispositional ontology.

Crisp believes Lee’s interpretation begins to unravel when he claims that Edwards moves away from Berkeleyan idealism toward a purely dispositional idealism, wherein the world continues to exist through the nexus of habits and laws that govern the world. Crisp argues that none of Lee’s evidence *requires* this dispositional understanding because it is more consistent with an ontological account where there are created and uncreated substances.

Lee also has to answer Edwards's belief in continuous creation. Continuous creation is basically the idea that God creates the world *ex nihilo* moment-by-moment and that God is the only causal agent in the world. Lee’s interpretation seems to be in opposition to Edwards’s continuous creation. If God created habits or laws that govern the world, then God would not be creating everything *ex nihilo* moment-by-moment. Crisp cites Edwards’ “Original Sin” as evidence where he states that God’s upholding created things is “altogether equivalent to an immediate production out of nothing at each moment, because its existence is not merely in part

from God, but is wholly from him” (Edwards 401). This means, according to Crisp, that every moment is numerically different from the next. So, if Edwards holds to continuous creation, then there are no dispositional attributes that persist long enough to perform any action. God is constantly recreating everything. Edwards’s idealism and continuous creation cannot be accounted for in Lee’s interpretation. On Crisp’s reading, Edwards remains a traditional substance metaphysician.

Examining the Text

I will begin by looking at specific texts that Lee uses to make his argument. The first text that we will examine is Miscellany 241, which states that “all habits are a law that God has fixed, that such actions upon such occasions should be exerted” (Edwards 241). This passage is able to fit within Lee’s framework. The problem, however, is that this text is simply describing habits. Edwards does not say that all attributes are habits, but rather that all habits are laws. This is the passage upon which Lee builds his understanding of Edwards’s ontology. In the traditional interpretation of Edwards, it is possible for Edwards to have reconceptualized “habit” in a unique way without it being all that exists. Lee’s strong claim needs strong evidence because of its radical nature, but I have not found anything in Edwards’ work that suggests all attributes are dispositional. Because of this, it is more reasonable to understand the created order as dispositional in some sense, but not purely dispositional.

Miscellany 241 is used again later in the book, because it states that the “[soul’s] essence consists in powers and habits” (Edwards 241). Lee uses this to demonstrate that habits do not simply belong to entities, but are constitutive of their being. This is coupled with a passage from “Subjects to be Handled in the Treatise of the Mind” that states “laws. . .constitute all permanent being in created things, both corporeal and spiritual” (Edwards 391). Lee’s understanding that

“things...do not have habits, but *are* habits” is just as plausible as the traditional interpretation given Edwards’s lack of clarity. Edwards does not go so far as to say that *only* laws constitute all permanent being. If “constitute” here really means “to be a part of the whole,” then it would be reasonable for Edwards to say that laws constitute permanent being without being committed to *only* laws constituting being. Laws or habits are a part of the whole. Lee fails to consider how this can be consistent with a substance ontology.

The next text that Lee uses to advance his interpretation is “Of Atoms.” In this essay, Edwards explains that an atom is a body that cannot be made less. It is indivisible and impenetrable. He, then, makes the claim that “solidity, indivisibility, and resisting to be annihilated are the same thing” (Edwards 208). Next, he makes the claim that the solidity of bodies and the being of bodies are the same thing. Lee takes this to mean that a body is not a substance, but rather solidity, and solidity is an activity. If we stop here, then Lee’s interpretation seems justified. But, as Lee admits, Edwards does not stop here. He goes on to conclude that “solidity results from the immediate exercise of God’s power” (Edwards 214). On the surface, this may sound like it supports Lee’s view, but we must remember one of Edwards’ core doctrinal commitments: idealism. Solidity is just an idea in the mind of God, which is entirely consistent with the rest of Edwards’s work, and is the more straightforward reading. So, where Lee thought that Edwards was already abandoning traditional metaphysics, he was actually still operating in the framework of substance and its modes.

In the very same essay, Edwards states that “there is no proper substance but God Himself (we speak at present with respect to bodies only). How truly, then, is He said to be *ens entium*” (Edwards 215). Edwards clarifies “with respect to bodies only,” because he is explaining his idealism. Bodies do not exist as substance. They exist as ideas in the mind of God.

This is reminiscent of Berkeley's idealism. Right above this, Edwards states that the certain unknown substance that philosophers used to think subsisted by itself (substratum) was just solidity itself. Where Lee would point this out as an activity, I would point out that this is an idea. We see this in "Of Being" where Edwards writes that the universe "exists nowhere but in the divine mind" (Edwards 206). This demonstrates that we do not have to abandon the traditional interpretation of Edwards in favor of a dispositional ontology. These passages simply point back to Edwards' idealism. As Edwards notes in No. 34 of "The Mind," "the existence of the whole material universe is absolutely dependent on idea" (Edwards 352).

"The Mind" is a major text for Edwards's ontology, so it is important that we take a closer look. Edwards explains how the ideas that we passively receive through our bodies are communicated to us immediately by God. If Lee's interpretation were correct, then habits or dispositions would be causal. However, Edwards is clear that everything that we perceive is the direct result of God causing our perception. This is Edwards's continuous creation, wherein God is the only causal agent. God is creating the world out of nothing moment-by-moment, and because of this, is causing our every experience. Edwards also states that "all truth is in the mind and only there" (Edwards 340). This once again, supports his idealism, which states that the only things that exist are minds and their ideas. Edwards's continuous creation greatly troubles Lee's interpretation.

Edwards explicitly states that he is thinking in terms of substances and modes in No. 25 when he states, "the distribution of the objects of our thoughts into substances and modes may be proper, if by substance we understand a complexion of such ideas which we conceive of as subsisting together and by themselves and by modes, those simple ideas which cannot be by themselves or subsist in our mind alone" (Edwards 350). The only way that Lee could explain

this passage would be to say that what Edwards means by “ideas” is actually “habits.” This is not an obvious reading. In No. 27, Edwards claims that objects are merely mental existences and that the material universe exists nowhere but in the mind. In No. 61, the only substance, for Edwards, is God. He explains that it is natural for men to suppose that there is some latent substance, or substratum, that upholds the properties of bodies, because the properties of bodies are such that they need a cause. “That something is He by whom all things consist” (Edwards 380). This is a blatant affirmation of God as substance. These conclusions do not figure into Lee’s interpretation of Edwards.

Edwards’s Use of Idealism, Essentialism, and Occasionalism

We have touched on the doctrines of idealism, essentialism, and continuous creation in Edwards’s work, but I am going to explain how these work together to form the basis for Edwards’s view. Idealism states that all that exists are minds and their ideas. Berkeley is the first popular idealist in philosophical history. Berkeley maintained that matter was literally nonsense, holding that only created and uncreated minds existed. This was close to the position that Edwards held. As we have previously stated, Edwards believed that the only *true* substance is God. It could still be the case, though, that human minds are created, immaterial, finite substances. Or, Edwards could be understood as a panentheist that thinks that God is the only substance. On this view, creation would be an extension of God. Regardless, for our purposes in this paper, it is primarily important to note that Edwards was indeed an idealist.

Essentialism is controversial as a doctrine of Edwards as we have seen, since Lee and others reject it entirely. It is important, though, to understand what this theory means since I have spent most of the paper arguing in favor of it. Essentialism divides everything that exists into substances and their modes. This is a major characteristic of Modern philosophy, starting with

Descartes, through Spinoza, Leibniz, and Berkeley. Locke was one of the first of the period to give less importance to the concept of substance, though it was still an important question to answer for philosophers of that time. As I have argued, Edwards was committed to the concept of substance, though it may have looked different from other conceptions of substance. The point that shows Edwards's commitment to essentialism is that he conceives of God as the only true substance. This is enough to demonstrate that he was, in some capacity, working within the framework of essentialism. Lee's reading of Edwards's substance language is insufficient, because it requires us to reinterpret the plain language that Edwards uses.

Continuous creation is the third doctrine that we will briefly explain. As I have noted, continuous creation holds that God continually creates the world out of nothing moment-by-moment. This is important for Edwards, because it demonstrates how everything is wholly dependent upon God. Edwards's main concern in all of his theology and philosophy was the glory of God, and this radical view of the world's dependence upon God shows God to be all-powerful. Without continuous creation, there would be objects in the world that were capable of existing without the immediate exercise of God's power. For Edwards, this was inconceivable. This doctrine expresses God as the first and only cause. While philosophers like Locke maintained a theory of cause and effect where one object can cause another object to move, Edwards held that only God could cause an object to move. This, once again, shows the depth of Edwards' belief in God's sovereignty and the created order's dependence upon God.

The combination of these three key Edwardsian doctrines creates a view of Edwards that cannot be consistent with Lee's interpretation. Idealism answers many of the questions that Lee thinks dispositional ontology answers. Essentialism reminds us that Edwards was actually committed to the concept of substance, though Lee denies this. And continuous creation

demonstrates that God continually creating the world out of nothing cannot be consistent with God setting fixed laws into place to act upon things.

IV. History of Trinitarian Theology

Having established a basis for Edwards' ontology, the conversation must move toward Edwards's trinitarianism. Before exploring Edwards's own views, however, it is important to situate him in the historical context of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity. As is the case with his philosophical ontology, his theology was not developed in a vacuum. Much of his theology was the result of combating heterodoxy. This is not uncommon in church history. Most explicit statements of doctrine in the church came as a result of clarifying doctrines in conversation with heretical or heterodoxical groups. This is especially true of the doctrine of the Trinity. Because the Bible does not give a detailed explanation of how we are to understand the Trinity, the Church's explicit pronouncement on details about the Trinity was developed over centuries. In fact, the word, *trinitas*, was not used until the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries with Tertullian (Letham 98). This left the Christian Church with the difficult task of defining the Godhead based on different stories and passages in the Bible. For our purposes, we will look at how this development occurred throughout history, beginning with the 2nd century and ending with Edwards.

Early Church Developments of the Trinity

The 2nd-century understanding of the Godhead is characterized most clearly by the 2nd century apologists. This includes Justin, Tatian, Athenagoras, and Theophilus. These 2nd century apologists saw Christ as the Father's thought expressed in creation and revelation (Letham 88). There were two things stressed. First was Christ's eternal oneness with the Father as the Word immanent in God. This is the beginning of the Trinitarian understanding of equality of persons in the Godhead. Secondly, there was an emphasis on Christ's appearance in human history as the Word expressed or emitted (Letham 89). The 2nd century apologists stressed both Christ's

eternality and his appearance in humanity. Here, we see the early traces of the doctrine of Christ's hypostatic union of divinity and humanity. The main issue with their understanding was the unity of God. Theophilus even seems to conflate the Word and the Spirit of God. Because of this, more development must take place to distinguish between the Word and the Spirit.

Theophilus was, however, the first to use the term "triad" in reference to God. This triad included God, His Word, and His Wisdom. This foreshadows further developments.

The next advancement of the doctrine of the Trinity comes from Irenaeus (130-200). Much of Irenaeus's work on the doctrine of God is written in his book, *Against Heresies*. In this book, he identifies the one true God with the Creator of the world, the God of the Old Testament, and the Father of the Logos. He stresses the continuity of this God between the Old and New Testaments. At this point, God is seen to be Creator and Father. Irenaeus also proves the existence of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, but does not discuss in detail the relations of the three. This provides a basis for future work to be done on the three persons of the Trinity, but Irenaeus provides only the basis. He does not explain how the three interact and he does not explicitly say that they are all God properly. He does, though, identify Jesus with the Christ and the Son of God. He states that the Son was with the Father from the beginning and thus dispenses the Father's grace in human history (Letham 93). This gives us the beginnings of the Church's understanding of the economy of salvation. In the work of salvation, we see that the Father and the Son are operating together. Specifically, Irenaeus explains that "the Father plans and gives commands, the Son performs and creates, while the Spirit nourishes and increases" (Letham 93). Much of Irenaeus's work on the doctrine of God came in contrast to the unique speculations of the gnostics.

Tertullian (160-220) came shortly after Irenaeus. He drafts a statement of faith that is similar to the forthcoming Apostle's Creed. His statement claims belief "in the Paraclete, the sanctifier of the Father of those who believe in the Father, and in the Son, and in the Holy Ghost" (Letham 98). Tertullian was the first to use the primary terms that express the Trinity today: "trinity," "substance," and "person." He even claimed that the one God exists in three distinct persons. The potential problem with Tertullian's view is that he saw an ordering of the persons that bordered on Subordinationism. For the early church, this view was heretical because it taught that God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are ontologically subordinate, and thus inferior to, God the Father. The one benefit of Tertullian's tendency is that it set up a barrier to another heresy known as Modalism. Modalism is the belief that God is one person that reveals himself in three different modes: Father, Son, and Spirit. We are beginning to see here that going too far in one direction or another typically leads to heresy.

The next significant figure in the development of the doctrine of the Trinity is Origen (185-254). He claimed belief in the Only One God, who created all things out of nothing. This is the God that appeared to the Old Testament saints. He also put forward a particular understanding of the doctrine of eternal generation of the Son by the Father. Origen's interpretation borders on heresy, though, because he states that the Father communicates His divinity to the Son at every instant. This implies that the Son is not divine in and of Himself. It implies that the Son is reliant upon the Father for divinity, and thus would not be true God of true God. This seamlessly leads us to Arius's problematic claims about God in 256.

Arius was one of the first to be deemed by the Church to have a heretical view of the Trinity. He claimed that God is unitary and the Father is unique. The substances of the Father, Son, and Spirit were thought by Arius to be distinct. This is in direct contrast to the common

modern-day definition of the Trinity, which is that God is three persons but one substance. This led Arius to believe that the Son was a created being. Contrary to the 2nd century apologists' and the New Testament's emphasis on the Son's eternity, Arius believed that God the Father created the Son *ex nihilo*. This places the Son in a position much closer to the rest of creation than to God. Athanasius (295-373) enters the controversy shortly after, and seemingly saves the doctrine of the Trinity. He is the first to define God's triunity as "One Being, Three Persons." He stresses the full deity of the Son and the Spirit. His contributions are, arguably, the main basis for the Council of Constantinople's (381) conclusions.

Out of the Council of Constantinople came the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. This Creed provides a summarized articulation of what the early church came to understand about the Godhead. It expresses belief in God the Father Almighty, One Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Jesus is defined as the only begotten Son before all ages, consubstantial with the Father. The Holy Spirit is defined as Lord and Life-Giver who proceeds from the Father and who is worshipped and glorified with the Father and the Son. Not much has substantially changed from this Creed to the modern-day Christian understanding of the Trinity. While terms like "substance" and "person" were later given important terminological precision, the Church has maintained the basic definition given by the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. Most orthodox Christian churches that are orthodox still affirm the conception of the Trinity encapsulated in this creed. The developments after this are mainly developments in emphasis rather than content.

Augustine (354-430) was one of the first prolific writers on the Trinity. His attention is thought to be rooted firmly on essential unity, though later in this paper, I will challenge this interpretation. But, for now, it is important to note that he is charged with moving close to the Modalist heresy, because of his emphasis on the unity of the divine persons. He makes the

significant claim that creation is an act by the Father through the Son in the Spirit. This specifies a single act, rather than three separate actions, further emphasizing the Godhead's unity.

Augustine also claims that God has one will, one power, and one majesty. There is not an act done by any of the Three in which all do not have a part (Letham 187). He also understands the Spirit as the communion and love of the Father and the Son. This is a key aspect of Edwards's own understanding of the Trinity that will be explored later in this paper.

Within the history of the doctrine of the Trinity, there is thought to be a major divergence between the East and the West. This began with the Filioque Controversy. *Filioque* is a Latin term that means "and from the Son." The Creed that came from the Council of Constantinople states that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father. In the late 6th century, some Western churches added that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and from the Son*. From this point forward, the East is charged with believing that the Holy Spirit proceeds strictly from the Father, and the West is charged with believing that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. While there is much to say about this controversy, for our purposes, it is only important to see this as a divide between Eastern and Western understanding of the Trinity. This divergence between the East and West dominates the historical developments of the Trinity up until the Reformers.

Developments from the Reformers

There was much speculation regarding the Trinity in the Medieval period. Many theologians were just as much philosophical as they were theological, and their philosophical understandings influenced their theology. John Calvin (1509-1564) marked a return to Scripture over speculation. It is contested just how uncomfortable Calvin was with philosophical language. In some cases, it seems that he is engaging in scholasticism, but in regards to the Trinity, Calvin

sought to understand the doctrine strictly from what the Bible said rather than through philosophical speculation. He seems to have stressed the three persons of the Trinity more than the one essence. This is not because he thought that plurality was more important than unity, but rather because he was combating Modalism. He stressed the eternal deity of the Son and the Spirit because it was common to emphasize the deity of the Father over the deity of the Son and Spirit. Once again, in the historical development of the Trinity, emphasis is placed as a result of combating heresy. Calvin attempts to combine Eastern and Western interpretations of the Trinity by saying that there is eternal generation of the Son and eternal procession of the Spirit. In this way, he is able to maintain that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, but that the Son is still generated by the Father. Calvin's stress on scriptural language for articulating the Trinity influenced forthcoming understandings of the Trinity, because people became more careful with their speculation (Letham 270).

Developments from the Puritans

William Ames (1576-1633) was a famous Puritan who had a deep influence on Edwards. In his book, *Marrow of Divinity*, Ames provided an early Puritan expression of Trinitarianism. This included the following four claims:

1. The subsistence of God is that one Essence, as it is with its personal properties.
2. The same essence is common to three subsistences; and as touching the Deity, every subsistence is of itself.
3. Moreover, nothing is attributed to the Essence, which may not be attributed to every subsistence in regard to the essence of it.
4. But those things that are attributed properly to every subsistence, cannot be attributed to the essence.

These four statements summarize the theological context regarding the Trinity that Edwards would soon enter.

John Owen (1616-1683) is the last theologian that we will discuss regarding the Trinity before exploring Edwards's view. In Owen, like Calvin, we find an absence of philosophical terminology. In place of that, we find profuse biblical exegesis. He was a synthesizer of those that came before him. Calvin's influence is especially strong. Because of his lack of philosophical speculation, his developments are not new in any substantive way. Rather than coming up with new ideas, he is deepening understanding of what the Church had believed centuries prior. Owen affirmed that God is One, and that this one God is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. He clarifies that the Holy Spirit is not merely the power of God, but rather an eternally existing divine substance. He was committed to the Filioque, and can be considered "Western" in that sense, though he was also concerned with the three persons like the "East." One significant aspect of Owen's thought is that he was able to avoid the dangers of Aquinas's doctrine of divine simplicity by specifying that God's "will is not coterminous with His essence" (Letham 7). While Owen does hold to divine simplicity, he avoids the potential dangers of oneness with this specification. This will be important when we turn to Edwards and his struggles with divine simplicity.

V. Interpreting the History of Trinitarian Theology

Now that we have sufficient knowledge of the events and main theologians in the history of Trinitarian theology, we need a proper hermeneutic by which to interpret this history. Amy Plantinga Pauw is one of the most thorough writers on Edwards's view of the Trinity. She reads Edwards through the lens of the Threeness - Oneness paradigm. By utilizing this paradigm, Plantinga Pauw concludes that Edwards's Trinitarian theology is an aspect of his dispositional ontology. It is clear so far that I think viewing Edwards's ontology as strictly dispositional is unfounded, but at this point in this paper, I am locating this within Edwards's view of the Trinity. Rather than interpreting Edwards through the threeness-oneness paradigm, I will be defending Steve Studebaker's view that we ought to interpret Edwards's Trinitarianism in light of its historical-theological context (Studebaker 270). This context includes the Trinitarian Controversy that was present at the time and the rise of deism in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. I will also explain how a misreading of Augustine's work on the Trinity has led to this misinterpretation of the history of Trinitarianism. As such, Edwards's view is actually aligned most closely with Augustine's mutual love model of the Trinity.

Threeness-Oneness Paradigm

Before explaining how the threeness-oneness paradigm is misleading, it is important to understand what it is exactly. It is a hermeneutic that "reduces the theological history of trinitarianism to the conceptual idioms of threeness and oneness" (Studebaker 271). This threeness-oneness divide is seen as a divide between how the East and West understands the Trinity. The hermeneutic suggests that Eastern Trinitarianism starts with an understanding of the plurality/threeness of divine persons as the most fundamental aspect of the Godhead. Western Trinitarianism starts with understanding the oneness and unity of God as the most fundamental

aspect of the Godhead. Eastern Trinitarianism is represented by Richard St. Victor and the Cappadocians, while the West is represented by Augustine.

This paradigm locates the difference between the East and West in the analogies used to describe the Trinity. The Augustinian tradition is identified by Augustine's psychological model of the Trinity. According to this interpretation, Augustine suggests that God the Father is the mind (or memory), who generates God the Son by an eternal act of self-reflection. God the Holy Spirit proceeds as the mind's self-love of its self-knowledge. Augustine employed another, less widely-known analogy describing the relations between the Godhead. This is called the mutual love model. This model demonstrates that the Holy Spirit is the bond of love that unites the Father and the Son. In the psychological analogy, the Holy Spirit is defined as the Father's love for the Son, whereas the mutual love model defines the Spirit as the mutual love of the Father for the Son and of the Son for the Father. In both analogies, Augustine uses "the mental operations of one person to illustrate the immanent Trinitarian relations" (Studebaker 272).

The threeness tradition employs the three-person analogy to describe the Trinity. In this analogy, the Trinity is explained by the example of Peter, James, and John. They are three distinct persons, but they all share a common nature of humanity. The threeness tradition uses this to show that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three distinct persons that share a common nature of divinity. Each divine person is a particular instance of the divine essence. The threeness tradition charges the oneness tradition with being monistic and modalistic, characterizing Augustine as the architect of this problem.

Problems with the Paradigm

It is not uncommon for scholars to use the threeness-oneness paradigm without investigating its validity. For example, Plantinga Pauw uncritically assumes this paradigm in her

interpretation of Edwards. She does not provide evidence for this understanding of Trinitarianism.

This paradigm was not used until the late 19th century with the French theologian, Théodore de Regnon (Studebaker 274). De Regnon did not use the terms “threeness” and “oneness” but rather “patristic” and “scholastic.” For him, the patristics emphasized God’s threeness and the scholastics emphasized God’s oneness. The patristic era is represented by the Cappadocians and the scholastic era is represented by Augustine. We can see here how this paved the way for the threeness-oneness paradigm.

One of the major problems with the paradigm is that it forces a reading of certain theologians, like Augustine, that lifts particular passages out of their literary context. Plantinga Pauw strictly uses Book 9 of *De Trinitate* to definitively understand Augustine’s Trinitarianism in terms of the mental triad. The problem with this hermeneutic is that it ignores the fact that “Augustine uses the mental triads in at least five forms to illustrate the doctrine of inseparable external operations, the incarnation, and how God is at once a trinity of persons and yet only one God” (Studebaker 275). This understanding of Augustine takes a few samplings of his work on the Trinity and generalizes his thought.

Another problem with using Augustine as the token Western Trinitarian is that it understands him apart from his historical-theological context. The threeness-oneness paradigm associates Augustine more with a Neoplatonic philosophy than with his theological background. It assumes that his doctrine of divine simplicity and formulation of divine unity arise from Neoplatonism. While it is true that Neoplatonism influenced Augustine in significant ways, it is not clear that he was pulling from a cohesive catalog of Neoplatonic writings (Studebaker 276). Divine simplicity may be consistent with Neoplatonism, but it should not be used as evidence for

understanding Augustine as being dominated by Neoplatonism. Augustine was more concerned with Scripture than Neoplatonism. The Old Testament emphasizes the oneness of God, which is more likely to be the reason that Augustine also emphasized divine simplicity. Therefore, we cannot view Neoplatonism as Augustine's primary influence. Neoplatonism does not discredit a reading of Augustine that emphasizes triunity.

In contrast, Augustine's historical-theological background gives us a clearer picture of his doctrine of divine simplicity. During the late 4th century, the pro-Nicene doctrine of inseparable external operations was pervasive (Studebaker 277). This is the doctrine that appears as Augustine's formulation of divine simplicity throughout his writings. This takes into consideration writings from "*Epistle 11* – Augustine's earliest trinitarian writing (389), *Sermon 52* (410–12), in a later writing – *Tractate 20* (418–19), and throughout *De Trinitate*" (Studebaker 277). Augustine's use of the mental triad is used primarily to demonstrate the doctrine of inseparable operations rather than God's oneness. His purpose with these analogies was to show how one divine person can accomplish a divine act, like the Son in the Incarnation, while the Father, Son, and Spirit operate inseparably. This doctrine assumes a specific divine unity that understands the three divine persons as essential to divinity.

Due to the problems with the threeness-oneness paradigm, I will not be using it to interpret the history of Trinitarian theology. Moreover, I will not use it to understand Edwards's doctrine of the Trinity. Instead, I will use Edwards's historical-theological context to interpret his understanding of the Trinity. The significance of this interpretation is that it will lead us away from understanding his doctrine as primarily threeness. Ultimately, this will lead us away from viewing his ontology as primarily dispositional.

VI. Edwards's View of the Trinity

Plantinga Pauw's Interpretation

As stated previously, Amy Plantinga Pauw is one of the most thorough writers on Edwards's doctrine of the Trinity. As such, her writings deserve ample attention. She concludes that Edwards aligned with the threeness position, or social trinitarianism. Her evidence includes a specific text from Edwards, Miscellany 571, and his doctrines of consent and excellency. First, we will look at Miscellany 571. In this Miscellany, Edwards addresses the Christian's future state in heaven. This is where he discusses how believers are united to Christ and able to enjoy communion with the Father. He employs a particular understanding of the Trinity to show how believers are welcomed into communion. Edwards explicitly uses social terms to describe the fellowship between believers, Christ, and the Father. He writes that the people of God "should be in a sort admitted into that society of three persons in the Godhead" (Miscellany 571). If we already have the oneness-threeness paradigm in mind, then this text may strike us as evidence of Edwards adhering to the threeness tradition. But, if we understand that this oneness-threeness paradigm was not used until the 19th century and that it may not be the correct interpretation, then this is just a piece of Edwards's writing that acknowledges the plurality of persons in the Godhead. Therefore, the use of these terms does not provide sufficient evidence to identify which Trinitarian model Edwards is utilizing, and, in fact, relies on an anachronism.

The next way that we can look at this text is from a conceptual framework. The question we must ask is: "what trinitarian model is most compatible with this notion of union with Christ and participation in the immanent fellowship between the Father and the Son?" (Studebaker 280). Fortunately, Edwards answers this question by saying that "they all have communion in the same spirit, the Holy Ghost" (Miscellany 571). The Spirit is the bond of communion. This aligns

most clearly with Augustine's mutual love model. The Spirit's economic role is tied to his relation to the Father and the Son. The Spirit's bond of love is what allows humanity to commune with the Godhead. Plantinga Pauw sees this text as affirmation of the threeness tradition rather than a utilization of the mutual love model. This is because she is presupposing the threeness-oneness paradigm. This becomes fatal to her understanding of Edwards's doctrine of the Trinity.

The next evidence from Plantinga Pauw that I will analyze is her understanding of the theological concepts of consent and excellency. She believes that these doctrines led him to social trinitarianism. There are a few times in Edwards's writings on the Trinity where he claims that God is excellent by virtue of loving consent, and therefore, must be a plurality. We see this clearly in Miscellany 117 when he writes, "Then there must have been an object from all eternity which God infinitely loves. But we have showed that all love arises from the perception, either of consent to being in general, or consent to that being that perceives" (Miscellany 117). This could be taken as an example of Edwards employing social trinitarianism, or it could be an instance of the Augustinian mutual love model. In *The Mind*, Edwards claims that God's excellence is his love for himself, which is the mutual love between the Father and the Son, and this mutual love is the Holy Spirit (The Mind 364). By reading this in combination with Miscellany 117, we can see how Edwards is using Augustine's mutual love model. In *Discourse on the Trinity*, "Edwards maintains that the fellowship between the Father and the Son consists in the Holy Spirit" and this Holy Spirit, being the mutual loving consent of the Father and the Son, is the excellency of God (Studebaker 281). This reading, unlike Plantinga Pauw's, does not commit Edwards to social trinitarianism.

Now that we have consulted Edwards's texts concerning consent and excellency, it is evident that he is employing the mutual love model. Plantinga Pauw interprets his use of social terms as evidence for social trinitarianism. This is because she is beginning with the assumption that social terms are evidence of the threeness tradition and terms of unity are evidence of the oneness tradition. But, as we have seen, this is not necessarily the case. If the lens of the threeness-oneness paradigm is taken off, then we are left with an interpretation of Edwards that views him in light of his historical-theological context. With this, it is clear that Edwards is aligning himself with the Augustinian tradition. The threeness-oneness paradigm does not allow for this interpretation, because it sees Augustine as being fundamentally monistic rather than pluralistic. But, a consultation of his writings demonstrates that we should not interpret him strictly as one over the other. The same conclusion can be made regarding Edwards.

Reading Edwards in his Historical-Theological Context

Rather than using the insufficient threeness-oneness paradigm, I will attempt to situate Edwards in his historical-theological context. As was demonstrated in the historical overview of Trinitarianism, most doctrinal developments occur as a response to heresy. Edwards's doctrinal articulations can be seen as combating the heretical views in his day. One of the significant aspects of his context was the Trinitarian Controversy, which was a late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century debate about the Trinity. It originated with Samuel Clarke (1675-1729), who was a British metaphysician and theologian. He was heavily influenced by Locke and Newton. Clarke was infamous for diverging from an orthodox understanding of the Trinity. He was charged with teaching a form of modalism. He taught that the Son derives from the Father by the will of the Father and as such is not a necessary being (Studebaker 283). He emphasized that God is one and only the Father is properly God, because if the Son and the Spirit were also God,

then there would be three separate Gods. This was a form of modalism, because Clarke implied that the Son and the Spirit were manifestations of the Father.

Clarke aligned with the deists in believing the unity of God precluded the Trinity. This understanding of God's oneness fit within the rationality of the Enlightenment, where the doctrine of the Trinity appeared to contradict reason. Edwards was adamant that an orthodox understanding of God did not contradict reason. He sought to demonstrate the rationality of the Christian religion through philosophical reasoning. This leads us to another important aspect of Edwards's context: deism. The deists argued that the Reformed understanding of predestination opposed the goodness of God. By explaining that the Trinity is the mutual love of the Father and the Son, Edwards attempted to show that the Trinity is the rational basis for belief in the goodness and love of God. He argued that the solitary God that the deists believed in could not be infinite love and goodness, because he would have no one with whom to exercise these qualities. The Trinity provided a rational basis for the Reformed doctrines of the goodness of God and predestination.

Edwards's doctrine of the Trinity has the emphasis that it does because he opposed his present cultural context. In this context, God's plurality, rather than his oneness, was under attack. Because of this, Edwards had more to say about God's plurality. This seems plausible when considering the history of the doctrine of the Trinity. In fact, it is expected. Throughout Christian church history, theologians have emphasized whatever aspect of God is under attack. The orthodox understanding of the Trinity has been established by different theologians and philosophers emphasizing different, various true claims about the Trinity from century to century. What Edwards is doing is not new. It is another iteration of what we have seen throughout church history. Edwards's work on the Trinity is a defense of Reformed theology as

rational in an intellectual context that was pushing back. This is not the only work of Edwards written for this reason. *Original Sin* and *Freedom of the Will* were both written to explain Reformed doctrine in a rational way.

By acknowledging Edwards's historical-theological context, we can understand his emphasis on God's threeness. He was defending the aspect of the Trinity that was under attack by the Enlightenment Deists. Plantinga Pauw interprets this as a latent social trinitarianism. However, I simply see this as a response to his theological context. This allows for a reading of Edwards as an advocate of the mutual love model rather than boxing him into the arbitrary threeness tradition.

Discourse on the Trinity

Now that we have a hermeneutic by which to read Edwards, we can look at his texts regarding the Trinity in more depth. The first text we will look at is Edwards's *Discourse on the Trinity*. It is his most comprehensive writing on the Trinity. One of the most important aspects of God, for Edwards, is God's own happiness. He argues "God is infinitely happy in the enjoyment of himself, in perfectly beholding and infinitely loving, and rejoicing in, his own essence and perfections" (Trinity 113). Because of this, Edwards reasons that God must have an eternally perfect idea of Himself. This idea that God has of Himself is His own image and perfect representation that is ever in His view. This constitutes God's enjoyment of Himself. God is able to be all-loving and eternally happy and joyful because He is loving this perfect idea of Himself. Edwards writes that what arises from this is "a most pure and perfect energy in the Godhead, which is the divine love, complacence and joy" (Trinity 113). Edwards understands 1 John 4:8, "God is love" to prove the plurality of persons in the Godhead. This is because love is essential and necessary to God, and as such is expressed by eternal communion and fellowship.

Now that Edwards has attempted to show the plurality of persons in the Godhead, he must explain *how* there are multiple persons. He does this by furthering his explanation of God and God's perfect idea of Himself. Edwards explains that when we, creatures, have an idea of something, there is always imperfection in it. When God has an idea, there is no imperfection. Because of this, when God has an idea of Himself, there is actual duplicity. If God has an idea of Himself "so as thence to have delight and joy in himself, he must become his own object" (Trinity 114). He sees this idea of God as a *substantial* idea that has the very *essence* of God and, thus, is truly and properly God. By thinking, God generates another person that is infinite, holy, eternal, and the very same God. This perfect Idea of God is the Second Person of the Trinity (Trinity 117). He is the only begotten Son that "is the eternal, necessary, perfect, substantial and personal idea which God hath of himself" (Trinity 117). Edwards ends this section by explaining how this view is consistent with Scripture.

Edwards then goes on to explain the third person of the Trinity. When God has the perfect Idea of Himself, Edwards reasons that there is a "most pure act" that proceeds (Trinity 121). This pure act is an infinitely sweet and holy energy between the Father and the Son. This is the mutual love that they share for one another. The Godhead acts most perfectly and most infinitely in this love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father. Edwards claims here that the Deity is pure act. This perfect mutual love between the Father and the Son simply *is* the Holy Spirit. Edwards ties in the verse from 1 John 4:8, explaining that God is love, because the Holy Spirit is the love of the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit "naturally expresses the divine nature as subsisting in pure act and perfect energy, and as flowing out and breathing forth in infinitely sweet and vigorous affection" (Trinity 122). At this point, Edwards has shown that there are

three divine persons. All good things are of God the Father, through God the Son, and in God the Spirit.

We could stop here and assume that because Edwards has emphasized the plurality of persons, that he is employing the social model of Trinitarianism. But, we must ask: how are we to understand this plurality of persons? Are we to see them as fundamentally distinct rather than fundamentally unified? As argued earlier, my view is that we ought to see this as an instance of the Augustinian mutual love model. This *Discourse* seems to affirm this interpretation. Edwards is quick to clarify that the Son and the Spirit are properly and truly God. He states that the whole divine essence truly and distinctly subsists both in the divine Idea and divine Love.

Perichoresis

Perichoresis is a doctrine that does a lot for Edwards's Trinitarianism. It refers to the mutual indwelling of the divine persons. It is the way that Edwards gets around a seemingly contradictory position. He affirms that there cannot be three centers of understanding and will in God, because He is one God. But Edwards also affirms that there are three divine persons who have understanding and will. These two ideas seem to contradict one another. That is, until Edwards utilizes the doctrine of perichoresis. In his book, *Jonathan Edwards Among the Theologians*, Oliver Crisp explains how Edwards employs perichoresis. He states that in the Edwardsian understanding, the divine persons "have parceled out to them many of the divine attributes usually thought to reside in the divine essence, apart from those that are 'mere modes or relations' of God, such as immutability and eternity" (Crisp 49). Edwards identifies the Son with divine understanding and the Spirit with divine love. Therefore, it appears that the Son *is* divine understanding and the Spirit *is* divine love. These are not simply attributes of the divine essence, they are divine persons. Without perichoresis, this is illogical. Perichoresis explains that

each of the divine persons indwells the others, so “the divine understanding that is the person of the Son is also possessed by the other two divine persons - he *is* their understanding” (Crisp 49). The same can be said of the Spirit, who *is* their love and their will.

Kyle Strobel develops this understanding of Edwards’s use of perichoresis by explaining that instead of the Father, Son, and Spirit being persons in their own right, the triune persons are not persons individually. The Father is not a divine person without understanding and love, “so also the Father is not a person without the Son or the Spirit” (Strobel 28). This is expressed most clearly in the *Discourse on the Trinity*. Previously, I noted that Edwards is not using an innovative model to understand the Trinity. This does not mean that Edwards is not being innovative in any sense. His innovation is found in his particular use of perichoresis. He is using Augustine’s model of the Trinity, but reconceiving it with perichoresis so that he retains “the Augustinian notion of a single divine understanding and will” while “reallocating these to the divine persons rather than retaining them within the divine essence” (Crisp 50). The three divine persons are the only true distinctions within God, but they cannot be understood as persons in isolation from one another. Strobel acknowledges that Edwards’s doctrine requires a particular take on perichoresis in which the divine persons simply *are* the divine essence.

With this innovation in articulating the Trinity, Edwards is able to affirm excellency and consent without adhering to social trinitarianism. He understands the unity and plurality of God simultaneously through perichoresis. Edwards affirms the Augustinian notion that the Godhead has one understanding, one love, and one will that is shared between the divine persons, but he diverges with his particular use of perichoresis. In this theological move, Lee supposes that Edwards distances himself from the notion of the divine essence. Rather than Edwards distancing himself from the notion altogether, it seems that he is reinterpreting divine essence. As Strobel

states, “In contrast to seeing the Father as the only person in whom the divine attributes obtain, Edwards posits that the divine attributes *actually are* the Son and the Spirit” (Strobel 236). This means that the divine persons *are* the divine essence. In this way, contra Lee, we can see Edwards more closely aligns with the language used before him. It is clear that what Edwards is doing is innovative and new in some regard. This innovation, however, simply exists at the level of articulation. He is not proposing a new understanding of the Trinity. He is simply articulating his received theological tradition in a different way.

Locke's Influence on Edwardsian Trinitarianism

Previously in this paper, I mentioned John Locke's philosophy and that Edwards relied on it for his Trinitarianism. Now, I will explain how Edwards used Locke's unitary conception of the will. Edwards argues that the difference between God and ourselves is a difference in degree of perfection. Because of this, God is “a mind with the essential powers of understanding and will, following Locke's account of human nature” (Helm). According to Paul Helm, the Godhead is a case of a Lockean mind, but accompanied by perfection and pure spirituality (Helm). When Edwards is proving the existence of the Second Person of the Trinity, he is utilizing Locke's concept of ideas of reflection. The idea that God has of Himself is a case of an idea of reflection. It is a perfect example of a Lockean idea of reflection, because God has no ideas of sensation since He is pure spirit. God's perfect idea of Himself is thus truly a duplicity, as Edwards argues in his *Discourse on the Trinity*.

Locke's concept of the unity of the mind is also utilized by Edwards when proving the Third Person of the Trinity. This proof is more focused on the willing power of the mind, since the Holy Spirit is the love and will of God. Helm expresses this clearly when he states that for

Edwards, “the sum of God’s will is His loving Himself” (Helm). This is how he explains Edwards’s argument for the third person of the Trinity:

1. God is necessarily love.
2. Love is essentially other-regarding.
3. God necessarily loves another, the idea of Himself, the Son.
4. The Holy Spirit is that love. (Helm)

God’s holiness, justice, mercy, grace, etc. are God’s own love to Himself. The way that Edwards makes sense of God’s attributes, once again, is by appealing to perichoresis. While Edwards was clearly influenced by Locke, it is important to remember that Reformed orthodoxy was more important to Edwards than Locke’s philosophy. Locke’s ideas were used by people all throughout Europe to strengthen their own philosophies. Similarly, Edwards used Locke’s ideas to strengthen his own Puritan orthodoxy.

VII. How Edwards's View of the Trinity and His Ontology are Inextricably Tied

Essentialism

As we have seen, Lee dispenses with Edwards's essentialism. While this is significant for Edwards's ontology, it is equally significant for his Trinitarianism. Lee argues that Edwards abandons the Early Modern concept of substance and modes in favor of a dispositional account of being. I disagree with this reading, because Edwards uses substance language in articulating the Trinity. For Lee's reading to be correct, it would have to overlook Edwards's clear use of substance language.

Edwards actually discusses substance in his *Discourse on the Trinity*. When writing about the Second Person of the Trinity, Edwards says this:

Therefore as God with perfect clearness, fullness and strength understands himself, views his own essence (in which there is no distinction of substance and act, but it is wholly substance and wholly act), that idea which God hath of himself is absolutely himself. This representation of the divine nature and essence is the divine nature and essence again (Trinity 116).

In this passage, Edwards is explicitly affirming essentialism. God's substance is wholly substance and wholly act. If Edwards was abandoning the notion of substance altogether, surely he would not use language of substance metaphysics. Or, if he did, surely he would clarify at some point in his writing that he was understanding substance *only* in terms of disposition. As I have argued above, however, Lee misreads Edwards's understanding of habits. Moreover, Lee's interpretation strains the plain reading of Edwards's words. If Edwards was not operating under the framework of essentialism, then it would change our understanding of his Trinitarian view. If Edwards was arguing that God is fundamentally disposition rather than substance, then he would

not be able to affirm the traditional definition of the Trinity as one substance, three persons.

However, since I have established above that Edwards maintains the traditional understanding of the Trinity, this is, on my view, incorrect.

Plantinga Pauw's Interpretation

Plantinga Pauw argues that Lee's interpretation of Edwards's ontology actually makes *more* sense of Edwards's Trinitarianism. *The Supreme Harmony of All* is one of the most thorough works on Edwards's doctrine of the Trinity. In this book, Plantinga Pauw makes the case that Edwards's Trinitarian reflections provide a strong link between his metaphysics and his zeal for the church. She argues that "in the case of Edwards, attention to the Trinity is requisite to understanding his metaphysics" (Plantinga Pauw Ch. 2). My argument is similar to Plantinga Pauw's in that we both see Edwards's Trinitarianism as essential to understanding his metaphysics. We diverge in the way we interpret his Trinitarianism and metaphysics. She argues that the Trinity was the paradigm of a "new concept of being" that Edwards was promoting. In this supposed new concept of being, to *be* means to be intentionally related. Much of Plantinga Pauw's interpretation comes from Lee's interpretation of God as disposition. What is unique to Plantinga Pauw is her emphasis on Edwards's Trinitarianism as a requisite to understanding his metaphysics.

Plantinga Pauw argues that Edwards is saying that physical reality is not a collection of independent substances. She appeals to Edwards when he states that "every real being must, as a condition of its reality, stand in some relation to other things and even to all other things" (Works 6 p. 85). She argues that Edwards's Trinitarianism is social/relational and his ontology is dispositional. These are inextricably tied.

Plantinga Pauw sees tension within Edwards's theology between the divine simplicity of the Medieval and Reformed traditions and the Trinitarian threeness of the East. Because of this tension, she claims that "the notion of divine simplicity was never truly incorporated into [Edwards's] theology" (Ch. 2) and that there were more indications of departure than indications of adherence. Edwards supposedly developed an alternative conception of oneness that revolved around the notions of excellency, harmony, and consent. This provided a metaphysical alternative to divine simplicity, because the doctrine of divine simplicity was typically accompanied by substance metaphysics. When Edwards affirmed triplicity, she sees this as flatly denying divine simplicity.

What is surprising is that after asserting that divine simplicity was never incorporated into Edwards's theology, Plantinga Pauw admits that he occasionally affirmed divine simplicity outright. Of course, she suspects that he does this reflexively rather than thoughtfully. But, an *outright* affirmation of divine simplicity ought not be brushed to the side. Edwards explicitly says that God is perfect and simple in *Freedom of the Will* and he never explicitly denies this (Works 1, p. 377). Plantinga Pauw ignores this by saying that Edwards does not explain simplicity. This is an odd argument considering Plantinga Pauw discusses, in depth, the Reformed tradition's understanding of simplicity. Edwards stands squarely in the Reformed tradition. Why should we assume there is a break between the two, especially since Edwards explicitly affirms divine simplicity. Would it not be strange for him to use the language of one of their primary doctrines and mean something entirely different? If Edwards did, in fact, use divine simplicity in a new way, he surely would have explicitly redefined it. While Edwards may not always be a simple writer, he is a thorough writer.

Plantinga Pauw states that Edwards does actually explicitly reject divine simplicity in his *Discourse on the Trinity*. The text she uses as evidence is “If a man should tell me that the immutability of God is God or that the omnipresence of God and authority of God, is God, I should not be able to think of any rational meaning of what he said” (Trinity 119). It might be tempting to assume he does reject simplicity from this passage if we read it apart from his other works. But, accompanied with the rest of Edwards’s writings, this interpretation becomes less enticing. This is where Kyle Strobel’s interpretation sheds light on what Edwards is doing. Strobel suggests that Edwards is able to maintain divine simplicity with his particular spin on perichoresis, where the Son is the understanding and the Spirit the love of God and these attributes are person-constituting. Perichoresis is the way in which Edwards maintains divine simplicity. Edwards sees both the threeness and the oneness of God through the lens of perichoresis. God is One, because He is not an amalgam of parts. He cannot be understood as different parts/characteristics pieced together. This does not negate a Trinitarian view, because the three persons of the Trinity cannot be understood apart from one another. The Trinity is three persons, but these persons are not parts of a whole. They are tied inextricably to one another. In this way, Edwards is able to affirm the triunity of Trinitarianism.

My View of Edwards’s Trinitarianism and Ontology

As I have expressed elsewhere, I find it to be the case that Edwards’s Trinitarianism and his ontology cannot be understood apart from one another. To start, it is important to bring together all of the different philosophers and theologians that influenced Edwards. I am taking Edwards to be fundamentally Augustinian. This means that I think his view of the Trinity is not radically new, but can be found mostly in Augustine’s writings. What I find to be new in Edwards is his specific use of perichoresis alongside a basically Augustinian model to further

explain the Trinity. Edwards is in a historical-theological context where many theologians actively decided to stop speculating about the Trinity in a philosophical way. People like John Calvin feared that speculation would breed heresy or unorthodoxy. While it seems that Edwards was concerned with orthodoxy, he does not seem to share this same concern with Calvin. Edwards is expanding on the Trinity in ways that those before him were reticent to do. He is comfortable going beyond what Scripture says about the Trinity. Because of this, he is able to develop a Trinitarian philosophy rather than just a Trinitarian theology. Though he does push the boundaries of orthodoxy, Edwards remains in his received theological tradition.

I also view Edwards's work as a result of his philosophical context. It is evident that the Early Modern philosophical period is marked by a focus on substance metaphysics. Edwards may have been less concerned with substance than someone like Descartes, but it is not clear that he rejected the notion altogether. As I have quoted, Edwards uses the language of substance metaphysics. Edwards would have been clearer had he actually dispensed with this understanding. Edwards was clear when he was pushing the boundaries of Scripture in his discussion of the Trinity by saying that he was willing to speculate. Because of this, it seems that he would have done the same with his metaphysics. Because of the influence of Locke and Malebranche on Edwards, it seems that he was using the same metaphysical framework that they used, even if they diverged in certain ways.

Edwards's innovation is found in his synthesis of metaphysics and Trinitarianism. Edwards understands the world through the lens of substance. God is the only proper substance. We should not conclude that God is pure disposition because (1) this interpretation is not clear throughout Edwards's writings and (2) this would be a radically new view in the Early Modern period. Edwards uses the phrase "created substance" to explain creatures. This appears to be a

contradiction in terms considering that substance refers to something that exists independently. It may be tempting to reconfigure an interpretation of Edwards that does not lead to this contradiction. But, this apparent contradiction does not imply that Edwards was not understanding the world through substance. It simply means that his beliefs about substance may not have been convincing. For Edwards, God is pure spirit rather than material, and everything that exists comes from the mind of God. This is where Edwards's idealism is clear. There is no material substance, only ideas. Therefore, humans and plants and animals and all created things are only ideas in the mind of God.

God would no longer be pure act if God were purely dispositional. As we have seen, however, Edwards clearly believed this was true of God. The interpretation of God as disposition necessitates the possibility of God increasing. If God is able to increase, then there must be potentiality in God. Edwards does not believe there is any potentiality in God. In order to account for God's actuality, He must be substance rather than disposition. Because God is substance, Edwards is able to affirm that the Trinity is one substance and three Persons. The substance of God is what accounts for the divine essence. In this way, God can be understood as One Being. If God was pure disposition, His simultaneous oneness and threeness would not be clear. This is because disposition is difficult to grasp as the fundamental building block of reality. Edwards's use of substance as the fundamental reality fits within his philosophical context. It also allows for a reading that coheres with Edwards's understanding of God as pure act.

This interpretation of Edwards sees him as an innovative synthesizer of the opinions before him. Edwards was well-read, and considered many different philosophical positions. He was able to use Locke's philosophy in accordance with Reformed orthodoxy alongside Malebranche's idealism to create an understanding of the Trinity that is tied to a view of God as

the only true substance. This is a unique position in that it is a combination of views that do not obviously go together. Edwards uses the philosophy and science of his time to articulate a view of God that is rational. It may not be without flaw, but he does use reason to understand and uphold Reformed theology.

VIII. Conclusion

In sum, I have argued that Edwards used the Early Modern framework of substance in order to understand the fundamental realities of nature. For Edwards, God is the only true substance. He is not simply disposition, because if He were, He would be in a state of potentiality. Edwards is clear that God is pure actuality. Because of this, God must be substantial. This One God is three Persons. These three Persons are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Edwards is able to assert both the unity and plurality of the Godhead.

Edwards is unique in that he was willing to explain the Trinity with analogies that were not taken directly from Scripture. This sets him apart from some Reformed theologians like John Calvin. This should not be interpreted as a break with the Reformed tradition, however. Alongside the Reformed tradition, Edwards sought to explain Christianity in a rational way. Though he was willing to use philosophical speculation in ways that not all Reformers were comfortable with, his goal was the same. Edwards used philosophy to make sense of the theological doctrine of the Trinity. He understood the Trinity in terms of his philosophical ontology. He utilized doctrines of essentialism and idealism in an effort to understand the Trinity in a rational way.

While Edwards was a unique figure in the history of philosophy and theology, I reject Lee's and Pauw's interpretation that he was putting forth a new way of thinking about ontology and the Trinity. Instead, Edwards used his intellect to articulate anew the old theological tradition he had received. No doubt, controversy in Edwards scholarship will continue due to reignited interest in his work. My hope is that the conversation will be made clearer by further attending to Edwards's historical and theological context.

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