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A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

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Is Imputation Unjust?
Jonathan Edwards on the Problem of Original Sin



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Perhaps no one in the history of the Church (aside from Pelagius) was more vocal and persistent in objecting to the reformed doctrine of imputation and original sin than was John Taylor (1694-1761) of England. His views were made explicit in a volume he wrote in 1735 titled, *The Scripture-Doctrine of Original Sin*. Certainly the best testimony to the influence of Taylor's work was that provided by Jonathan Edwards (1703-58):

According to my observation, no one book has done so much towards rooting out of these western parts of New England, the principles and scheme of religion maintained by our pious and excellent forefathers, the divines and Christians who first settled this country, and alienating the minds of many from what I think are evidently some of the main doctrines of the gospel, as that which Dr. Taylor has published against the doctrine of original sin.¹

Taylor's disdain for the reformed doctrine of imputation and original sin was grounded upon one foundational principle that he held to be inviolable: *sin and guilt are entirely personal*. One person's sin is his alone and cannot be reckoned or charged to the account of another. Neither can guilt in any sense be corporate apart from the voluntary consent of all

persons involved. "A representative of moral action," said Taylor, "is what I can by no means digest. A representative, the guilt of whose conduct shall be imputed to us, and whose sins shall corrupt and debauch our nature, is one of the greatest absurdities in all the system of corrupt religion."² Concerning Adam and Eve, he insisted that as the sin

they committed was personal, done only by them; so also must the real guilt be personal, and belong only to themselves; that is, no other could, in the eye of justice and equity, be blameable and punishable for that transgression, which was their own act and deed, and not the act and deed of any other man or woman in the world.³

Taylor argues that only the person who has a "consciousness" of sin can justly be held guilty for it. It is absurd to suppose that an infinitely righteous God would charge with a crime persons who had no hand or choice in its execution, indeed, a crime committed before they even existed. Such is possible only on the "purely imaginary"⁴ supposition that one man's consciousness, and therefore liability of guilt, is transferable to another. To charge God with such an act is "highly profane and impious."⁵

Finally, in a statement that fairly shook with indignation, Taylor sums up his feelings concerning the reformed doctrine of original sin:

But that any man, without my knowledge or consent, should so represent me, that when he is guilty I am to be reputed guilty, and when he transgresses I shall be accountable and punishable for his transgression, and thereby subjected to the wrath and curse of God, nay further that his wickedness shall give me a sinful nature, and all this before I am born and consequently while I am in no capacity of knowing, helping, or hindering what he doth; surely anyone who dares use his understanding, must clearly see this is unreasonable, and altogether inconsistent with the truth and goodness of God.⁶

Is imputation immoral? Is it unjust? Is it wrong for God to hold us accountable for the sin of Adam? Many have respond-

ed to these questions, but none with more creativity and depth than Jonathan Edwards. What was his solution to the problem posed by the doctrine of original sin?

If we are to understand Edwards' solution to this problem we must come to terms with two crucial and controversial concepts he developed: his doctrine of "continuous creation" and his theory of "personal identity." We will begin with the doctrine of continuous creation (*creatio continua*).

WHO "CAUSED" IT?

According to this doctrine, the initial creation *ex nihilo* of all things was but the first act in a never-ending series of creative acts whereby God each moment preserves and upholds the existence of all things. The same power required to bring an entity *into* being is required to sustain it *in* or *as* being. Therefore, the distinction between "creation" and "preservation" or "conservation" is only semantic, not conceptual. Edwards argues that it is by means of a continuous creation from instant to instant that all created substance, both material and immaterial, is preserved in being. Thus he says that

God's *preserving* created things in being is perfectly equivalent to a *continued creation*, or to his creating those things out of nothing at *each moment* of their existence. If the continued existence of created things be wholly dependent on God's preservation, then those things would drop into nothing, upon the ceasing of the present moment, without a new exertion of the divine power to cause them to exist in the following moment.⁷

The doctrine of continuous creation simply asserts that the existence of any and all entities at any and all times is the immediate effect of *divine* power. Edwards would insist that event B always follows event A, not because A is the efficient cause of B, but because God has ordained that when A occurs (an event that God produces *ex nihilo*), B will follow. What you and I might call a causal sequence Edwards calls a series of divine acts. All substance and all events are productions of divine power, continuous creations. Event B does not follow event A because of some mechanistic impact of A on B. The

principle on account of which B necessarily follows A is *the will of God* operating on B so that it will follow A. It is the *divine wisdom* which has determined that it was fitting for B to follow A and for A to precede B in the order of nature (and *not* anything in A or B themselves).

But how does this apply to the problem posed by the imputation of Adam's sin? The answer comes in the form of Edwards' theory of "personal identity."

WHO AM "I"?

The doctrine of continuous creation implies that the existence of any created entity in each successive moment through time is nothing more than the effect of God's immediate power *in* that moment *in* time. If this be so, "then what exists at this moment, by this power, is a *new effect*; and simply and absolutely considered, is not the same with any past existence, though it be like it, and follows it according to a certain established method."⁸ On what basis, then, do we say, for example, that George W. Bush is the *same* person at 10:30 a.m. that he was at 10:29 a.m.? On what basis is Bush's personal identity at 10:30 the same as it was at 10:29? More important still, on what basis is the Bush of 10:30 praiseworthy (or blameworthy, as the case may be) for the moral deed committed at 10:29? Edwards' answer is that there is no identity except that which depends on the arbitrary action of God. God unites the successive moments of Bush's existence and *treats them as one*, "by communicating to them like properties, relations, and circumstances; and so, leads us to regard and treat them as one."⁹ *God's will*, therefore, is the *only* reason why the body of a man at 40 years of age

is one [and the same] with the infant body which first came into the world, from whence it grew; though now constituted of different substance, and the greater part of the substance probably changed scores (if not hundreds) of times; and though it be now in so many respects exceeding diverse, yet God, according to the course of nature, which he has been pleased to establish, has caused, that in a certain method it should communicate

with that infantile body, in the same life, the same senses, the same features, and many the same qualities, and in union with the same soul; and so, with regard to these purposes, 'tis dealt with by him as one body.¹⁰

Edwards is now ready to apply the twin truths of continuous creation and personal identity to the problem of imputation. Again, the objection raised by Taylor and others is that it is unjust for God to treat Adam and his posterity as if they were in any sense one, when it is obvious that they are not. To this Edwards responds by saying that

all oneness, by virtue whereof pollution and guilt from past wickedness are derived, depends entirely on a divine establishment. 'Tis this, and this only, that must account for guilt and an evil taint on any individual soul, in consequence of a crime committed twenty or forty years ago, remaining still, and even to the end of the world forever. 'Tis this, that must account for the continuance of any such thing, anywhere, as *consciousness* of acts that are past; and for the continuance of all *habits*, either good or bad: and on this depends everything that can belong to *personal identity*. And all communications, derivations, or continuation of qualities, properties, or relations, natural or moral, from what is past, as if the subject were one, depends on no other foundation.¹¹

Therefore, the objection that it is unjust and immoral to impute the sin of one moral agent to another who is distinct and distant, is mistaken precisely because the two agents are neither distinct nor distant. The sin of Adam is not the sin of his posterity merely because God imputes it to them, declares Edwards. It is truly and properly theirs and on *that basis* God imputes it to them. It is truly and properly theirs because, by a divinely constituted identity, they are *one moral person* [but *not* one *numerical person*] with him (Adam) who personally and physically transgressed.

David Weddle concludes from this that Edwards did *not* in fact hold to the doctrine of representative headship. According to Weddle's understanding of Edwards,

Adam does not stand as the “representative” of the race, one individual for whose actions all others are held responsible, nor is he the one in whom the essence of all mankind is present—he is rather the head of a complex set of all members of the human race which have been or will be born, which is regarded in the mind of God as one moral person. All men are “constituted” a personal unity, just as an individual self is constituted a person, by the “arbitrary” establishment of a continuity among all the distinct moments of human history in the mind of God.¹²

It is on the basis of this constituted unity, says Weddle, that

all persons born now are as integrally related to the first man [Adam] as the moments of a man’s life at forty years of age are continuous with the first moment of his birth. As a man is morally culpable for the moments of his past existence because they are truly his own, so all men are exposed to judgment for the actions of the first man because he is truly one with them.¹³

Let me summarize what Edwards is saying by asking a question and then answering it. “If you and Adam are two different persons, how can God be just in imputing his sin to your account?” The answer is that “You and Adam are *not* two different persons. Just as God treats you *now* as one and the same person with you twenty years ago, so also God treats all of us *now* as one and the same *moral* person with Adam.” The only reason you are *now* the same person you were twenty years ago is because God arbitrarily¹⁴ decided somehow to connect the successive moments of your existence into a unified personal whole. What he did with you, says Edwards, he did with all of us and Adam.

Is this a satisfactory response to the objection raised by John Taylor and others to the morality of imputation? As much as I hate disagreeing with Edwards, I don’t think it is. And here is why.¹⁵

To suggest that God arbitrarily sustains through successive moments in time a sameness of identity in George W. Bush is

one thing. With that I have no quarrel. But it is altogether something else to argue that God arbitrarily sustains a sameness of identity between George W. Bush and Adam! How can it reasonably be said that George W. Bush *is* Adam in any meaningful sense? Edwards has said that the George W. Bush of 2003 is personally identical with the George W. Bush of 1963 because God has imparted to him, down through time, certain properties and qualities that make George W. Bush what he is. But what are the properties and qualities that George W. Bush shares with Adam that would make *them* one moral person? In other words, there is no commonly shared quality or property on the basis of which George W. Bush may justifiably be reckoned as *one* with Adam. We may say that they both are created in God’s image, that they both have a spirit and a body. But how can George W. Bush’s spirit be *the same as* or be *one with* Adam’s spirit, in order to make it morally just for God to punish Bush for Adam’s sin? I realize that George W. Bush’s spirit in 2003 is *the same as* and is *one with* his spirit in 1963. But how can Edwards say the same thing about George W. Bush’s spirit and *Adam’s*?

Paul Helm comes to Edwards’ defense by pointing out that he “did not hold that just any set of things whatsoever could, by the divine will, be constituted into a unity.”¹⁶ For new effects to be treated as one “they must be spatially and temporally continuous, and have sufficient qualitative identity (though not, of course, numerical identity) to make it possible for a wise God to treat them as one.”¹⁷ So, what counts as sufficient qualitative similarity? Edwards points to similar properties, relations, and circumstances that obtain between Adam and his posterity to warrant God’s treating them as one for the purpose of imputing the sin of the former to the latter. But it is precisely Edwards’ failure, in my opinion, to account for or explain the nature of such “properties” that renders his model implausible.

Edwards seems to be saying that God simply reckons it so. Adam’s posterity are born with the guilt and corruption of Adam’s sin because God determined to *treat* them together as one acting, willing person. But my objection is that there are

no qualities or properties which Adam and his posterity share that would lead us to believe they are one. I'll agree that, because of certain properties they all possess, they are all human beings. But that isn't the same as saying they are all the *same one* moral human being. Edwards is insisting that God simply says that as far as *he* [God] is concerned he has determined to treat them or to look upon them as one.

So why are Adam and his posterity regarded by God as one moral person? Because God says so. Period.

The problem this poses is that Taylor may yet object to God saying so, or rather, to *Edwards* saying that God says so. "But what extreme arrogance would it be in us," Edwards responds, "to take upon us to act as judges of the beauty and wisdom of the laws and established constituents of the supreme Lord and Creator of the universe?"¹⁸

My problem with Edwards' solution is simply this. Contrary to what Edwards would have us believe, there is *not* a legitimate correspondence between the identity of a "self" (like George W. Bush) through successive moments of time, and that alleged identity between all "selves" and Adam. In the case of an individual "self" (like George W. Bush), there are qualities and properties upon which a valid personal identity may be affirmed. But there are no such qualities and properties common to Adam and his posterity on the basis of which *their* identity may be asserted. The only basis for asserting such an identity, it would seem, is God's will.

I am not suggesting that Edwards' theory of personal identity and his doctrine of continuous creation are wrong. They may well be correct. But they do *not*, in my opinion, provide Edwards with a cogent basis on which to respond to the objection brought against the morality of imputation by John Taylor and others like him. It would have been better had Edwards simply said that God determined to deal with mankind in this manner, and that his will is the highest and only standard of what is just and moral and fair. His mistake came when he attempted to *prove* this to be true based on certain philosophical and theological theories which, in point of fact, prove no such thing.

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Notes

1. Jonathan Edwards, *Original Sin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 102.
2. John Taylor, *The Scripture-Doctrine of Original Sin, Proposed to Free and Candid Examination, and the Supplement* (London: M. Waugh, 1767), 108-09.
3. Taylor, *Scripture-Doctrine*, 13.
4. Taylor, *Scripture-Doctrine*, 15.
5. Taylor, *Scripture-Doctrine*, 14.
6. Taylor, *Scripture-Doctrine*, 385.
7. Edwards, *Original Sin*, 401. For a helpful explanation of this notion in Edwards, see Paul Helm, "Jonathan Edwards on Original Sin," in *Faith and Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 152-76.
8. Edwards, *Original Sin*, 402.
9. Edwards, *Original Sin*, 403.
10. Edwards, *Original Sin*, 398.
11. Edwards, *Original Sin*, 405.
12. David Weddle, "The New Man: A Study of the Significance of Conversion for the Theological Definition of the Self in Jonathan Edwards and Charles G. Finney," Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1973, 225.
13. David Weddle, "The New Man," 225.
14. Edwards' definition of "arbitrary" is "that which depends on nothing but the divine will; which divine will depends on nothing but the divine wisdom" (*Original Sin*, 403).
15. Yet another who finds similar fault with Edwards' reasoning is Randall E. Otto, "The Solidarity of Mankind in Jonathan Edwards' Doctrine of Original Sin," *Evangelical Quarterly* 62:3 (1990):205-21. See also John Kearney, "Jonathan Edwards and the Imputation of Adam's Sin," *The Princeton Theological Review* Volume VIII, Number 4 (November 2001):4-13.
16. "Jonathan Edwards on Original Sin," 171.
17. "Jonathan Edwards on Original Sin," 171.
18. Edwards, *Original Sin*, 406.