Jonathan Edwards’s Idealism

Introduction

Jonathan Edwards is generally acknowledged to be one of the most prominent American philosophers.¹ In this chapter I sketch his early intellectual development, and analyse his general philosophical position. This chapter is though more historical than other chapters. For Edwards belongs to a generally unknown past the rudimentary knowledge of which (at least) is requisite for a historically adequate analysis of his philosophical arguments about God. So I begin with his main dates, studies and philosophical sources that make up the necessary historical information. The first section also has another end. In the past scholarship sought to

single out a single influence. Perry Miller contended for he dominant influence of John Locke on Edwards and Norman Fiering more recently argued for Malebranche. Their source material is scarce and their followers now few. The philosophical profile in this chapter seeks to show that there is not one or two philosophers who influenced Edwards, but that there is a very broad range of thinkers posing the same questions though with varying answers. Thereafter I present the general philosophical position Edwards articulated following his education and maintained to the end of his life. I conclude the chapter with an attempt to deepen the knowledge of Edwards’s logic, physics and metaphysics by evaluating and showing how they developed out of his studies.

*Edwards intellectual development/The formation of an idealist*

The most important dates of Edwards’s life can be given succinctly. He was born October 5 1703, East Windsor, Connecticut. Following Grammar school, he studied as an undergraduate and a graduate at Yale College from 1716 to 1722. After a period of independent study and ministry in various churches, Yale appointed Edwards tutor in May 1724, where he seems to have taught the main philosophical subjects. In February 1727 he became minister in Northampton of the most prominent church in Connecticut and western Massachusetts, and held this position until his dismissal in 1750. He then settled in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, and completed his major books *Freedom of the Will* (1754), *Original Sin* (1758), *Concerning the End for which God Created the World* (1765) and *The Nature of True Virtue* (1765). Earlier publications included *Religious Affections* (1746). In 1757 he was appointed president of Princeton College, but died on March 22, 1758, following a smallpox inoculation.

Of greater importance for a historically informed philosophical assessment is how and when Edwards arrived at his general position. However, the scholarship on Edwards’s philosophical development has long suffered from the early

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2 The definitive biography is now Marsden, Edwards. For autobiographical material, see Jonathan
editors’ mistaken dates of most of his early manuscripts. Fortunately, Thomas Schafer’s analyses of the early manuscripts during the last quarter of the twentieth century has led to a revision of their dates, and consequently to a (more) correct account of Edwards’s philosophical development.

Although there is no complete contemporary record of his curriculum and earliest sources, the main scope of his syllabus can be reconstructed from circumstantial evidence and the chief philosophical influences can be inferred from his

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early writings.\textsuperscript{5} Edwards’s studies agreed most likely with the Harvard College education of his father and grammar school teacher Timothy Edwards, and his Yale tutor and cousin Elisha Williams.\textsuperscript{6} Harvard had during the second half of the


\textsuperscript{6} Timothy Edwards graduated MA from Harvard in 1694, and Elisha Williams BA in 1711 and MA 1714. Williams was later an important rector of Yale; see Warch, \textit{School of the Prophets} 132-136, 164-185, Kelley, \textit{Yale: A History} 37-45, Franklin Bowditch Dexter, \textit{Sketch of the History of Yale University} (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1887) 24-26. The first trustees of Yale College ‘intended their school to serve as revitalized Harvard’. They ‘were aware of the content and purposes of the classical curriculum taught at Harvard and in European universities, and therefore they adopted it without question or comment [in 1701].’ Warch, \textit{School of the Prophets} 40, similarly 244; and 186-249 on the curriculum in general. ‘While the course of study remained
find one or two that Edwards is copying one should rather understand him as working originally within the same framework of the modern turn to the subject.

2. Explication of Edwards's idealism

Edwards’s formative years culminated in his attempt to write a systematic philosophy of nature and in particular to develop an account of idealism.59 He planned a treatise with the following title:

The Natural History of the Mental World, or of the internal world: being a Particular Inquiry into the Nature of the Human Mind with respect to both its Faculties, the Understanding and the Will, and its various Instincts and Active and Passive Powers.

He outlined the introduction:

Concerning the two worlds, the external and the internal: the external, the subject of natural philosophy; the internal, our own minds. How the knowledge of the latter is in many respects the most important. Of what great use the true knowledge of this is, and of what dangerous consequence errors here are, more than in the other.60

The importance of the knowledge of the internal world over the knowledge of the external world well sums up Edwards’s views. In this section I exposit his idealism and examine it in the following section.

Towards the end of his life Edwards outlined his ontology in the paper ‘Notes on Knowledge and Existence’ (about 1756 or 1757):

all existence is perception. What we call body is nothing but a particular mode of perception; and what we call spirit is nothing but a composition and series of perceptions, or an universe of coexisting and successive perceptions connected by such wonderful methods and laws.61

The statement ‘all existence is perception’ is a conclusion for which Edwards does not supply the premises in this paper. (The subsequent statement in the quotation is of course only an explication of ‘existence’.) ‘The Mind’ (composed 1723-1748) similarly assumes an argument for idealism: ‘we have also shewn that all existence is mental, that the existence of all exterior things is ideal.’62

60 Edwards, Scientific and Philosophical Writings 387. He ends ‘The Mind’ with a plan of the treatise.
61 ‘Notes on knowledge and existence’ in Edwards, Scientific and Philosophical Writings 398. The document begins: ‘there is no such thing as material substance truly and properly distinct from all those that are called sensible qualities.’
62 ‘Mind’ no. 9 Edwards, Scientific and Philosophical Writings 341. written June-August 1724, but idealism is implicit already in no. 1, written September-October 1723. (These dates are taken from Schafer YE 13:93, 95.) Anderson suggests that this refer to the beginning of ‘Of Being’, where Edwards seems to contend that nothing cannot not be since that requires an idea of ‘nothing’ and thus that there is some being. According to ‘Of Being ’we run up to our first principle, and have no other to explain the nothingness or not being of nothing by.’ (VI:202) Yet, this line of argument seems also to suppose or be an inference from idealism rather than an argument or premise for idealism. The passage in ‘The Mind’ need not refer to another passage Edwards had written.
oms’ (composed January 1721-June 1722) Edwards concludes: ‘So that the substance of bodies at last becomes either nothing, or nothing but the Deity acting in that particular manner in those parts of space where he thinks fit.’

What are then Edwards’s premises for idealism? The final and fullest arguments for idealism are found in ‘The Mind’ and are restatements of his account of body (solidity) in ‘Of Atoms’. I discern four arguments in ‘The Mind’.  

but to a passage he would write. Cp. Anderson: ‘Such an account was given later in “The Mind.” No. 27.’ (p. 205 n. 8)

Here is a sample of other idealist statements: ‘As bodies, we have shewn in another place that they have no proper being of their own; and as to spirits, they are the communications of the great original Spirit.’ (‘The Mind’ no. 45 p. 363-4) ‘For in what respect has anything had a being, when there is nothing conscious of its being? […] Not at all more than there is sound where none hears it, or color where none sees it.’ (Misc. pp p. 188), ‘the existence of all corporeal things is only ideas.’ (Miscellanies #179) ‘Yea, it is really impossible it should be, that anything should be and nothing know it. […] nothing has any existence anywhere but in consciousness.’ (‘Of Being’ p. 204), ‘As nothing else has a proper being but spirits, and as bodies are but shadows, therefore …’ (The Mind no. 1 p. 337), ‘corporeal things exist no otherwise than mentally, and as for most other things, they are only abstract ideas.’ (‘The Mind’ no. 9 p. 342), ‘A mind or spirit is nothing else but consciousness, and what is included in it.’ (‘The Mind’ no. 11 p. 342), ‘the world, i.e., the material universe, exists nowhere but in the mind […] the existence of the whole material universe is absolutely dependent on idea’ (‘The Mind’ no. 34 p. 353), ‘all material existence is only idea’ (‘The Mind’ no. 40 p. 356), ‘the system of the ideal world’ (‘The Mind’ no. 40 p. 357), ‘when I say, “the material universe exists only in the mind” I mean that it is absolutely dependent on the conception of the mind for its existence, and does not exist as spirits do, whose existence does not consist in, nor in dependence on, the conception of other minds.’ (‘The Mind’ no. 51 p. 368) Last, ‘bodies, the objects of our external senses, are but the shadows of beings’ (‘The Mind’ no. 62 p. 380). The notion that bodies are but shadows of beings, is also found in John Norris: the ‘Material World is but a Phantom or a Shadow’ quoted in W. J. Mander, The philosophy of John Norris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 92.

63 Edwards, Scientific and Philosophical Writings 215.
64 Although William Wainwright claims that Edwards’s arguments for idealism ‘are found in “Of Being” and “The Mind”, 13 and 27,’ his 34 propositions long ‘reconstruction’ is actually based on ‘Of Atoms’ and not on those passages. Other passages in ‘The Mind’ appear also to have escaped his notice: William J. Wainwright, “Jonathan Edwards, Atoms, and Immaterialism,” Idealistic
First, in ‘The Mind’ 13 Edwards argues that mind constitutes matter from the different ideas of colour in the blind and the sighted:

The idea we have of space, and what we call by that name, is only colored space, and is entirely taken out of the mind if color be taken away; and so all that we call extension, motion and figure is gone if color is gone. As to any idea of space, extension, distance or motion that a man born blind might form, it would be nothing like what we call by those names. All that he could have would be only certain sensations or feelings, that in themselves would be no more like what we intend by extension, motion, etc., than the pain we have by the scratch of a pin, or than the ideas of taste and smell. And as to the idea of motion that such an one could have, it could be only a diversification of those successions in a certain way, by succession as to time; and then there would be an agreement of these successions of sensations with some ideas we have by sight, as to number and proportions – but yet the ideas, after all, nothing akin to that idea we now give this name to. And, as it is very plain, color is only in the mind, and nothing like it can be out of all mind. Hence it is manifest, there can be nothing like those things we call by the name of bodies out of the mind, unless it be in some other mind or minds.65

This argument may be reformulated:

1. The idea of space in the sighted is the idea of coloured space in the sighted.

2. For the idea of space in the blind is nothing like the idea of space in the sighted.

3. For the idea of space in the blind is caused by temporal successions of tactile sensations or feelings.

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65 Edwards, Scientific and Philosophical Writings 343-344. In ‘The Mind’ 42 something similar is said: ‘if you take anything that belongs to them [simple ideas] you take all.’
(4) For the idea of space in the sighted is caused by visual sensations or feelings.

(5) If the idea of colour can only be in the mind and not out of the mind, then the idea of space can only be in the mind and not out of the mind.

(6) Colour can only be in the mind and not out of the mind.

(7) Therefore /space/ can only be in the mind and not out of the mind.

I interpret the verbs ‘to have an idea’ and ‘to call by name’ as being used interchangeably. I take the nouns ‘space’ and ‘body’ to be used synonymously by Edwards. Premise (1) substitutes ‘in the sighted’ for ‘we’ in Edwards’s formulation, since in his argument ‘we’ is consistently contrasted with ‘blind’. It uses ‘idea of coloured space’ instead of Edwards’s simple ‘coloured space’, since he does not claim that the idea of space has a colour but that it depends on the idea of colour.66

I interpret the seemingly disconnected mentioning of ‘a man born blind’ in this context as sub-argument (2)-(4) for premise (1). For the reference to the blind follows the assertion that the idea of space/body depends on the idea of colour and the different ideas of space/body in the blind and the sighted relate to the sense of sight. Premises (3) and (4) make explicit what is implicit in Edwards’s ‘sensations or feelings’, namely the corpuscularian notion of perception as the causation of ideas by neural stimuli. Sensations cause ideas of pains, tastes, smells and sights. In (5) I simplify Edwards’s ‘take out’ with ‘can be’ by analogy of other formulations in this passage.67 Premise (6) uses the stronger ‘can’ rather than the weaker

66 I take the ideas of space and colour to be central to the argument and not the ideas of extension, motion and figure. Edwards only illustrates in passing the difference between the ideas of motion in the blind and the sighted. The idea of motion that the blind could have would only be the temporal successions of sensations and that is not the idea of motion of the sighted (although the blind’s idea of motion agrees with the ideas of number and proportion in the sighted).

67 The verb ‘take out’ and ‘to say what can(not) be in the thing itself’ (‘The Mind’ no. 27) and ‘remove’ (no. 61) implies something common. Perhaps ‘abstraction’? According to ‘The Mind’ no. 42, ‘if you take anything that belongs to them [simple ideas] you take all’ and colour is a sim-
‘is’ in Edwards’s formulation, since his formulation of the conclusion contains ‘there can be nothing’ and that requires the stronger ‘can only be’ in the premise. This makes the conclusion (7) somewhat stronger.

Second, in ‘The Mind’ 27 Edwards argues for the dependence of the world on perception from the sense of sight generally and from colour particularly. He proceeds from a parallelism between the sense of sight and the sense of touch (‘sense of feeling’):

If we had only the sense of seeing, we should not be as ready to conclude the visible world to have been an existence independent of perception as we do, because the ideas we have by the sense of feeling are as much mere ideas as those we have by the sense of seeing. But we know that the things that are objects of this sense, all that the mind views by seeing, are merely mental existences, because all these things with all their modes do exist in a looking glass, where all will acknowledge they exist only mentally.

Here ‘perception’, ‘ideas’ and ‘mental existences’ are used synonymously. This parallel argument may be interpreted thus:

(8) Objects of the sense of sight are merely perceptions, ideas or mental existences.
(9) For objects of the sense of sight with all their modes exist only mentally in a mirror.
(10) Objects of the sense of touch are as the objects of the sense of sight.
(11) Therefore objects of the sense of touch are merely perceptions, ideas or mental existences.

Two premises are implicit for Edwards’s general conclusion:

(12) The objects of the senses of hearing, smell and taste are merely perceptions, ideas or mental existences.
(13) The senses perceive the world.
(14) Therefore the world does not exist independent of perception.

‘The Mind’ 9: ‘space […] is a simple idea that is necessarily connected with other simple exterior ideas, and is, as it were, their common substance or subject.’
The analogy in (10) is of course not that tactile objects are visual objects but that they are merely perceptions, ideas or mental existences.

Third in ‘The Mind’ 27 Edwards also argues that the world is ‘an ideal one’ from the sensations of colour and resistance:

It is now agreed upon by every knowing philosopher that colors are not really in the things, no more than pain is in a needle, but strictly nowhere else but in the mind. […] For what idea is that which we call by the name of body? I find color has the chief share in it. ‘Tis nothing but color, and figure which is the termination of this color, together with some powers such as the power of resisting, and motion, etc., that wholly makes up what we call body. And if that which we principally mean by the thing itself cannot be said to be in the thing itself, I think nothing can be. If color exists not out of the mind, then nothing belonging to body exists out of the mind but resistance, which is solidity, and the termination of this resistance with its relations, which is figure, and the communication of this resistance from space to space, which is motion, though the latter are nothing but modes of the former. Therefore, there is nothing out of the mind but resistance. And not that, neither, when nothing is actually resisted; then there is nothing but the power of resistance. […] And how is there any resistance except it be in some mind, in idea? What is it that is resisted? It is not color. And what else is it? It is ridiculous to say that resistance is resisted. That does not tell us at all what is to be resisted. There must be something resisted before there can be resistance, but to say resistance is resisted is ridiculously to suppose resistance before there is anything to be resisted.

Let us suppose two globes only existing, and no mind. There is nothing there, ex confesso, but resistance.69 That is, there is such a law that the space within the

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68 Here one sentence is left out concerning divine power, since the existence of God is later presented as ‘corollary 1’ of this miscellany and not a premise in the argument.

69 About the same time David Hume sought to establish the idea of solidity in a similar way: ‘In order to form an idea of solidity, we must conceive two bodies pressing on each other without any penetration; and it is impossible to arrive at this idea when we confine ourselves to one object, much more without conceiving any.’ David Hume, A Treatise Concerning Human Nature, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge and P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978, 1739) I.IV.iv. The common source of Edwards and Hume may be Locke: ‘That which thus hinders the approach of two Bodies, when they are moving one towards another, I call Solidity.’ An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, 1689) II.iv.1.
limits of a globular figure shall resist. Therefore there is nothing there but a power, or an establishment. And if there be any resistance really out of the mind, one power and establishment must resist another establishment and law of resistance, which is exceedingly ridiculous. But yet it cannot be otherwise, if any way out of the mind. But now it is easy to conceive of resistance as a mode of an idea. It is easy to conceive of such a power or constant manner of stopping or resisting a color. The idea may be resisted—it may move, and stop, and rebound; but how a mere power which is nothing real can move and stop is inconceivable, and it is impossible to say a word about it without contradiction. The world is therefore an ideal one; and the law of creating, and the succession of these ideas, is constant and regular.  

Bypassing the circumstantial ad hominem fallacy in the very beginning, this meandering passage may be made more precise.

Before a re-formulation is attempted, I need to clarify Edwards’s use of ‘mode’ in this passage. (We came across this term in the previous argument, but there was no need to elaborate on it since that argument was not hanging on it.) Just before this argument, in ‘The Mind’ 25, Edwards sets out his distinction between ‘mode’ and ‘substance’:

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.

70 A similar line of thought is found in ‘On Being’: ‘All that we mean or can mean by solidity is resistance – resistance to touch, resistance of some parts of space. This is all the knowledge we get of solidity by our senses, and, I am sure, all that we can get any other way. But solidity shall be shewn to be nothing else more fully hereafter.’ Anderson remarks: ‘Jonathan Edwards’s account of solidity in “Of Atoms” preceded this discussion by one or two years. In this remark he probably expresses his intention to give another account of that property which would more fully support his argument. Such an account was given later in “The Mind.” No. 27.’ (p. 205 n. 8)

71 For with the phrase ‘every knowing philosopher’ Edwards claims that any claim to the objectivity of sensible qualities is itself ignorant and thus excludes the very possibility of defending their objectivity.

72 VI:350. Note that Edwards follows Arnauld rather than Locke on modes as simple ideas.
Here Edwards distributes not things but thoughts or ideas. By the ‘mode of an idea’ he means an idea that cannot be conceived or thought by itself but in another idea, and by the ‘substance of an idea’ a combination of ideas that can be conceived together and by themselves. This use of ‘substance’ thus clarifies what Edwards intends above with the expressions to have ‘the chief share in’ an idea, what ‘we principally mean’ and what ‘wholly makes up what we call’ something (which I take to be synonymous).

Here is my attempt to reformulate the second argument in ‘The Mind’ 27:

(15) If the substance of an idea cannot be conceived of the object, nothing can be conceived of that object.

(16) The idea of body is a combination of the ideas of colour, resistance, figure, and motion.

(17) The substance of the idea of body is the idea of colour.

(18) If colour does not exist out of the mind, then nothing belonging to body exists out of the mind but resistance, figure, and motion.

(19) But colour does not exist out of mind.

(20) Therefore nothing exists out of mind than resistance, figure, and motion.

(21) The ideas of figure and motion are modes of the idea of resistance.

(22) For figure is the termination of resistance with its relations.

(23) For motion is the communication of resistance from space to space.

(24) Therefore figure and motion cannot be conceived by themselves but only in resistance.

(25) Resistance is solidity.

(26) Resistance is inconceivable before anything is resisted.
(27) There is no actual resistance out of the mind, since something must be resisted before there can be resistance in the mind and there cannot be resistance before something is resisted.

(28) If there is potential resistance out of the mind, then there are (at least) two powers of resistance, since there cannot be resistance before anything is resisted and the resistance of something supposes something resisted.

(29) It is inconceivable that there is potential resistance out of the mind, since a mere power of resistance is not real.

(30) It is conceivable that resistance is a mode of an idea.

(31) If the idea of resistance cannot be conceived to be the substance of the idea of body, then nothing can be conceived of a body.

(32) Resistance cannot be conceived to be the body.

(33) Therefore a body is ideal.

(34) The world is the material universe.

(35) Therefore the world is ideal.

I interpret Edwards as using ‘ridiculous’ and ‘inconceivable’ synonymously with what ‘is impossible to say […] without contradiction.’ Hence ‘inconceivable’ in (25) and (28), ‘conceivable’ in (29) and ‘conceived’ in (30) and (31) express logical and not epistemological modalities.

Fourth and last, the argument from the subjectivity of sensible qualities re-occurs in ‘The Mind’ no. 61. It is an argument for the redundancy of substance. It denies that ‘some latent substance […] upholds these properties’ (380), namely the idea of solidity and resistance, and the reception of ‘sensible qualities of light,

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73 ‘the world, i.e., the material universe’. ‘The Mind’ no. 34 p. 353.

74 Note similar argument in ‘Of Atoms’ p. 350. In this chapter I deal with the passages in ‘The Mind’ 61 that pertain to the general denial of substance and in a following chapter with passages that pertain to an argument in favour of theism.
colors, etc. from the resisting parts of space’ (379). I apologise for the following long but crucial quotation:

Substance. It is intuitively certain that if solidity be removed from body, nothing is left but empty space. Now in all things whatsoever, that which cannot be removed without removing the whole thing, that thing which is removed is the thing itself; except it be mere circumstance and manner of existence, such as time and place, which are in the general necessary because it implies a contradiction to existence itself to suppose that it exists at no time and in no place. And therefore, in order to remove time and place in the general, we must remove the thing itself; so, if we remove figure and bulk and texture in the general, which may be reduced to that necessary circumstance of place.

If, therefore, it implies a contradiction to suppose that body, or anything appertaining to body beside space, exists when solidity is removed, it must be either because body is nothing but solidity and space, or else that solidity is such a mere circumstance and relation of existence which the thing cannot be without, because whatever exists must exist in some circumstances or other, as at some time or some place. But we know and everyone perceives it to be a contradiction to suppose that body or matter exists without solidity; for all the notion we have of empty space is space without solidity, and all the notion we have of full space is space resisting.

The reason is plain: for if it implies a contradiction to suppose solidity absent and the thing existing, it must be because solidity is that thing, and so it is a contradiction to say the thing is absent from itself; or because it is such a mode or circumstance or relation of the existence as it is a contradiction to suppose existence at all without it, such as time and place, to which both figure and texture are reduced. For nothing can be conceived of so necessarily in an existence, that it is a contradiction to suppose it without it, but the existence itself, and those general circumstances or relations of existence which the very supposition of existence itself implies. [---]

We do not think it sufficient to say it is the nature of the unknown substance [. . .] By substance, I suppose it is confessed, we mean only ‘something,’ because of abstract substance we have no idea that is more particular than only existence in general. Now why is it not as reasonable, when we see something suspended in the air, set to move with violence towards the earth, to rest in attributing of it to the nature of the something that is there, as when we see that motion, when it comes to such limits, all on a sudden cease? For this is all that we observe in falling bodies. Their falling is the action we call gravity; their stopping upon the surface of the
earth the action whence we gain the idea of solidity. It was before agreed on all hands that there is something there that supports that resistance. [---]

The whole of what we any way observe whereby we get the idea of solidity or solid body are certain parts of space from whence we receive the ideas of light and colors, and certain sensations by the sense of feeling. And we observe that the places whence we receive these sensations are not constantly the same, but are successively different, and this light and colors are communicated from one part of space to another. And we observe that these parts of space, from whence we receive these sensations, resist and stop other bodies, which we observe communicated successively through the parts of space adjacent, and that those that there were before at rest, or existing constantly in one and the same part of space, after this exist successively in different parts of space. And these observations are according to certain stated rules. I appeal to anyone that takes notice and asks himself, whether this be not all that ever he experienced in the world whereby he got these ideas, and that this is all that we have or can have any idea of, in relation to bodies. All that we observe of solidity is that certain parts of space, from whence we receive the ideas of light and colors and a few other sensations, do likewise resist anything coming within them. It therefore follows that if we suppose there be anything else than what we thus observe, it is but only by way of inference. [---]

The reason why it is so exceedingly natural to men to suppose that there is some latent substance, or something that is altogether hid, that upholds the properties of bodies, is because all see at first sight that the properties of bodies are such as need some cause that shall every moment have influence to their continuance, as well as a cause of their first existence. All therefore agree that there is something that is there, and upholds these properties; and it is most true, there undoubtedly is. But men are wont to content themselves in saying merely that it is something; but that 'something' is he by whom all things consist.75

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Recall Edwards’s definitions of ‘substance’ and ‘mode’: a substance is a combination of ideas that can be conceived by itself, and a mode is an idea that cannot be conceived by itself but in another idea. Edwards formulations about ‘substance’ agrees with contemporary but not with traditional accounts (although he may not have been clear on the difference).76

An attempt at reformulation:

(36) Whatsoever idea cannot be removed without removing the idea of the thing, is the idea of the thing itself or a necessary circumstance of its idea of existence.

(37) ‘For nothing can be conceived of so necessarily in an existence, that it is a contradiction to suppose it without it, but the existence itself, and those general circumstances or relations of existence which the very supposition of existence itself implies.’

(38) The ideas of time and place are necessary circumstances of the idea of a body, since the idea of a body cannot be conceived without the ideas of time and place.

(39) The idea of solidity is the idea of impenetrability or resistance.

(40) If the idea of solidity is removed from the idea of body, then nothing is left but the idea of empty space.

(41) The idea of empty space is the idea of space without the idea of solidity.

(42) The idea of full space is the idea of space resisting.

76 ‘The Idea then we have, to which we give the general name Substance, being nothing, but the supposed, but unknown support of those Qualities, we find existing, which we imagine cannot subsist, sine re substantia, without something to support them, we call that Support Substantia, which, according to the true import of the Word, is in plain English, standing under, or uphol- ding.’ Later on: ‘For our Idea of Substance, is equally obscure, or none at all, in both; it is but a supposed, I know not what, to support those Ideas, we call Accidents.’ Locke, Essay II.xxiii.2, II.xxiii.15.
If the idea of solidity is removed, then the idea of body is removed.

For (a) humans get (the idea of) solidity only and entirely from the observation of motion and (b) the existence of a body when solidity is removed implies a contradiction, since the removal of the idea of solidity is the removal of the idea of body, and a body can only be conceived to exist at some time or some place.

Therefore the idea of body is nothing but the idea of solidity.

Solidity is a bodily property that needs something to uphold it.

Bodily properties need some cause that upholds them.

It is generally supposed that ‘there is some latent substance, or something that is altogether hid, that upholds the properties of bodies’.

The idea of substance is insufficient to uphold bodily properties, ‘because of abstract substance we have no idea that is more particular than only existence in general.’

Therefore substance does not uphold bodily properties.

Premise (36) inserts ‘idea’, since Edwards is not considering the removal of things and he uses the verb ‘remove’ (like ‘take out of the mind’ and ‘take away’ in ‘The Mind’ 13) to refer to mental acts and is semantically opposite to ‘conceive’. ‘if you take anything that belongs to them [simple ideas] you take all.’ (‘The Mind’ no. 42 p. 360). This seems to be related to what Edwards calls ‘abstraction’.

So, these are the final four arguments of Edwards from idealism. From the different ideas of colour in the blind and the sighted, from an analogy between sensations of colour in the sense of sight and the sense of touch, from the sensations of colour and resistance, and the redundancy of substance to uphold solo resistance he argues that the world is ideal.

3. Evaluation of Edwards’s idealism

In this section I will analyse and evaluate Edwards’s arguments for idealism. The focus will be on the three concepts of pain, colour and resistance. For two of the
arguments claim that colours are as pains not in things but in minds and that the
ing the idea of body depends on the idea of colour (both ‘The Mind’ 13 and 27). Two
arguments assert that resistance cannot be in things but only in minds (both ‘The
Mind’ 27 and 61). I will begin with Edwards’s understanding of pain, since it is
basic to his understanding of colour. We must therefore examine Edwards’s notion
of pain in order to assess his notion of colour. I will proceed to the concept of
resistance. I will argue that the basis for Edwards’s idealism is misapprehensions
of sensation and perception. To show this I will clarify the correct usage of ‘pain’,
‘colour’ (with ‘blindness’ to some extent), ‘resistance’, ‘sensation’ and ‘percep-
tion’. For factual claims presuppose grammatical rules, namely distinctions be-
tween what can be said and what cannot be said, between what makes sense and
what cannot make sense. Thus Edwards’s idealism is conceptually confused.

First, Edwards assimilates perception of colour to sensation of pain in both
‘The Mind’ 13 and 27 and thus this notion is not only explicit in (6) and (19) but
implicit throughout (1)-(7) and (17)-(19). He contends that ‘pain is […] strictly
nowhere else but in the mind.’ It belongs (in other words) to ‘the internal world’
rather than ‘the external world’. His paradigm cases are the pain we have by the
scratch of a pin and the prick of a needle. Such mental samples of pain yield the
concept of pain, determine what is to count as the same or a different sensation
and serve as standards for the correct application of ‘pain.’ The meaning of the
word ‘pain’ stand for something ‘in the mind’ and the concept of pain is said to be
‘in mind’ by reference to sensations.

This understanding of pain by reference to sensation Edwards assigns to the
understanding of colour. The concept of colour is given ‘in mind’ by sensations or
private samples of colour. Humans ‘placed in certain circumstances, are the sub-

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77 Similar lines of argument are, for instance, found in Locke, Essay II.viii.16, and Berkeley,
Dialogues 1. Indeed, seventeenth and eighteenth century accounts of perception are generally
characterised by the assimilation of the concepts of sensation and perception.

78 These examples may be derived from (a secondary source on) Boyle and Descartes, who both
use the prick of a pin to for their physiological explanation.
jects of particular sensations by necessity: [...] they see the objects presented before them in a clear light, when their eyes are opened.” So Edwards takes himself to have had sensations that allow him to say ‘the sky is blue’, ‘the sun is yellow’, ‘blood is red’ and ‘mountains at a distance are blue’. The blind, on the other hand, lack such ideas of sight, but their situation would change if they gained sensations of colour:

I cannot doubt but, if a person had been born blind, and should have his eyes opened and should immediately have blue placed before his eyes, and then red then green, then yellow, I doubt not they would immediately get into one general idea. They would be united in his mind without his deliberation.

Such sensations show how colour-predicates should be used. The sighted have sensations of colours and therefore a correct idea of colour, whereas the blind do not have such sensations and therefore nothing like the idea of colour. If the eyes of a person born blind are ‘opened’, then he or she will form ideas of colours.

However, can feeling the pain of a needle be said to be like seeing the colour of blood? Can both pain and colour be said to be sensations? Here Edwards seems to be misled by the idiom of the location of pain. For it always makes sense to ask where it hurts but never where it colours. Although (trivially) pain can be said to be ‘in the mind’ of sensible beings but not of insensible beings (in that the former can whereas the latter cannot have pain), the pains humans, cats and dogs have are in their legs, stomachs, backs and so forth but not in their minds. (The only pains that can (equivocally) be said to be ‘in the mind’ are those of anxiety, depression, distress, grief, sadness, sorrow and the like.) There may be pain in the

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79 Edwards, Freedom of the Will 157. For Edwards corpuscularian account of particles and the sense of sight: ‘the effects of that intestine motion and mutual action of their minute parts is exactly the same; from that intestine action they all continually send forth as it were an infinite quantity of their minute parts, parts of the same kind, in like manner affecting the organ of our sight, and all causing the like sensation in us, and in like manner reflected and refracted by glass, water and other bodies.’ Jonathan Edwards, The ‘Miscellanies’: 833-1152, ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw, vol. 20, The Works of Jonathan Edwards (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) no. 976 p. 284.

80 Edwards, Scientific and Philosophical Writings 221.

81 ‘The Mind’ 43 (VI:362). I am not sure of the relation between ‘general idea’ and ‘simple idea’.

36
finger, but not colour in the eye (except in the equivocal sense of the colour of the sclera and iris or of a drop of paint). Still, the pain is not in the body in the way that the needle may be, since the needle may be taken out in a way that the pain may not. To feel a pain is not to feel the needle but a painful sensation. To have a pain from a needle is to feel that one has been pricked, but not to perceive anything since pain is not a perceptible object and such objects exist whether they are perceived or not. To see that blood is red is to perceive that it is red, but closing one’s eyes does not undo redness or blood. One may be mistaken, doubt or know that one sees a colour, but not that one has a pain. One may feel pain but not feel colour. Colour is not a sensation in the eye as smart is or the feeling of grit; nor is it in the mind as an idea of painting (but not a sensation) is. The pain from a prick of a needle is not felt with but in the finger, and the red colour of blood is not seen in but with the eyes, since there is no organ of sensation with which pain is felt but an organ of sight with which colour is seen. The colour seen and the pain felt are not two sensations, but rather one perceptual quality grasped and one painful sensation suffered. Sensations and perceptions belong to different categories; sensations belong to the category of passivity whereas perceptions belong to the category of activity.

The concept of pain is moreover not determined in terms of private samples but in terms of characteristic behaviour or characterised by behavioural manifestations. Edwards cannot privately exhibit the pain in the pricked fingertip, but he can publicly exhibit the difference between a fingertip that has been and one that has not been pricked by a needle. Edwards can also exhibit pain as he may writher, groan and/or avow his pain. He cannot show his pricked finger saying ‘Here is where it hurts’ and bystanders feel his pain in his finger (although they may be able to see that he is in pain).

Likewise, the concept of colour is not determined in terms of private samples or in terms of characteristic behaviour, but in terms of public samples. How colour words are to be used is given by standards, paradigm cases, patterns or
rules. Colours are defined by statements such as ‘That is blue’, ‘That is called red’, ‘That is named green’ and ‘That is yellow’ in connection with samples. What ‘red’ signifies is given by pointing, for instance, at strawberries or a sunset. If some of us could not distinguish blue objects from red objects, green objects from yellow ones and so on, then we would not have a shared colour language. The common power of sight is a prerequisite for the shared predicates of colour. The power of seeing is known in acts of sight, namely by correct application of colours-words for public samples. This also shows why Edwards is confused about blindness. It is true that the blind do not have the colour ideas or concepts of the (normally) sighted; the blind do not call colours by names as the sighted do. Yet, this is not because they have not had colours ‘placed before the eyes’, by not being ‘subjects of particular sensations’ of colour. Rather, to explain, define and apply colour words properly requires the ability, power or capacity of sight, and this the blind lack. Moreover, if the congenitally blind have their ‘eyes opened’ and predicate ‘blue’, ‘red’, ‘green’ and ‘yellow’ correctly, then they have mastered how the sighted already apply such terms to samples. Thus the sub-argument (2)-(4) contains conceptual confusions about blindness and sightedness.

Second, Edwards assimilates perception of surface to sensation of pressure. This influences (25)-(35) and (39-50). The sense of touch is exercised by pressure and the sensation of resistance. In ‘The Mind’ 13, ‘sensations or feelings’ are used synonymously or epexegetically, and there the phrase ‘successions of sensations’ seems to be synonymous with ‘successive perceptions’ in ‘Note Knowledge and Existence.

Assimilation of the sense of touch and tactile perception to sensation of pressure and resistance is easily done. Edwards is induced to associate the sense of touch with sensation, namely to consider that we perceive tangible qualities of objects by having sensations of resistance or pressure. For sensation can be characterised in the idiom of feeling and is closely associated with tactile perception by the concept of feeling. There is moreover no organ of either sensation or tactile perception (unless the skin or the hands are regarded as such), and the perceptual
organs are tactually sensitive. So, Edwards drastically reduces our rich and useful vocabulary of tactile perception. He only speaks about the feeling of resistance by hand or finger, but we may also feel the resistance of meat in our mouth or the spread of wine on the tongue. He merely writes about (perceptually) touching solid objects, but we can feel liquid objects and the warmth of the distant sun as well as the cold of the northerly breeze. Edwards writes as if the sense of touch is only exercised by pressure and passivity. Therefore it is ‘only by way of inference’ that ‘we suppose there be anything else than what we thus observe’; the solidity of bodies or even bodies themselves are inferred from the sensation of resistance. However, we must not be duped. For the sense of touch is also exercised by handling and activity, and it is clear that by manipulation we feel a manifold of qualities such as an object being compressible, rigid, elastic or moveable. Focusing on solid objects, we can feel qualities of shape, height and size as well as their dimensions, edges, locations and orientations. We can feel the round figure of a globe, but cannot have round sensations (let alone feel round). We can feel how great, large or small the bulk of the globe is, but cannot have great, large or small sensations. We can press our fingers at the globe and feel that it is solid, but cannot have solid sensations (sensations of solidity). When one feels that a surface is solid, one does not have a sensation of solidity in one’s fingertips (although feeling that something is solid may involve sensations of muscular strain and kinaesthetic awareness). Perceiving solidity involves (attempted) manipulation. The perception of roundness, greatness and rigidity are not inferred from sensations had. Perception is in the category of activity while sensation is in the category of passivity. Premise (27) even confuses our potential perceiving with a potential perceived. The potentiality of feeling the resistance of the globe is confused with the idea that what is felt is the potentiality of resistance. Samples of solidity are not to be found in the mind but in the world. Edwards misconceives touch as passive, because he misconceives it as sensation rather than perception.

Note that the above observations about pain, colour and resistance are not empirical but grammatical ones. They are not considerations that may be gainsaid by experiment; it is a matter of grammar that the concept of pain is determined in
terms of behavioural criteria, and that colour and solidity are determined in terms of public samples. These remarks concern what it makes sense to say, not what may be true or false. It makes sense to predicate ‘blue’ of the sky, ‘yellow’ of to the sun and ‘red’ of blood (but not ‘green’ of riding), and judgments such as ‘the sky is blue’, ‘the sun is yellow’, ‘blood is red’ and ‘mountains at a distance are blue’ may be true or false. However, on Edwards’s misconception, he must claim not that it is false that blood is red, the sky is blue and the sun is yellow, but that it does not make sense to predicate visual qualities of objects. Edwards’s argues instead (as will be seen in a coming chapter) that such attributions have a quite different meaning than the ‘vulgar’ one, namely God’s power to affect us in colourd ways. Moreover, Edwards says that ‘pain is not in a needle, but strictly nowhere else but in the mind.’ This looks to be a denial of something that happens to be false but could be true. Indeed, he ascribes the opposite view to his adversaries. Yet, what would count for pain to be in a needle? It is a mischaracterisation of needles causing pain in sentient beings to say that pain is not in a needle, since the denial implies that something would count as its having pain. However, that pains are not in needles does not merely happen to be false yet could be true, but is a nonsensical string of words. That pain is not in a needle does not characterise something that happens not to be the case. It makes no sense to deny that pain is in a needle; this denial is not false but incoherent. The proposition ‘pain is not in a needle’ is not a grammatical proposition at all. He is implying that such as is not a ‘knowing philosopher’ claims that pain is in a needle. Edwards makes ‘colours are not in things’ into a seeming grammatical proposition but it is sheer nonsense. The proposition ‘colours are in things’ (or perhaps better ‘colour are in surfaces’) seems to be a grammatical proposition.

*Conclusion [to be developed]*

Colour and solidity seem or appear to be ‘out of the mind’ (as Edwards puts it) but are not really so; they are rather like pain ‘in the mind’. What we know are ideas but they are not ideas of something and thus ideas are all there is.