



ALL RIGHTS RESERVED © THE RESOLVED CHURCH | Permissions: you are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material provided you NOT alter the wording in any way and you do not charge a fee. For web posting a link to this document is preferred.

The Resolved Church | www.theresolved.com | contact@theresolved.com | (619) 393-1990

A Paper Submitted for Contemporary Theology TTTT 709 - May 2004
Talbot School of Theology - By Duane Matthew Smets

"The Edwardsean Aesthetic Sense and its Epistemic Function"

Introduction

In the academy and beyond, postmodernism is the pop word of the day. Some embrace its thought wholeheartedly, some wholly reject it and call for a return to modernism, and then there are also those who are now speaking of a postpostmodernism in various terms. In a day of such confusion, the thought of Jonathan Edwards speaks in an almost prophetic way in its relevance to understanding and answering many of the concerns which surface from all three of these camps. The intent of this paper is not to systematically show how Jonathan Edwards relates and responds to each of these concerns but rather to focus in on one area of his thought, the aesthetic sense. Yet, even in simply focusing in on his idea of the aesthetic sense we will see how much it can address contemporary matters.

Edwards' thought on the aesthetic sense is truly the crowning point of his epistemology. The aesthetic sense is like the last puzzle piece that puts the whole picture together and tells us how anyone can know anything and what that knowing is. Throughout all of Edwards' writings there is a tremendous interconnectedness between all things,¹ which undoubtedly is one of the reasons why he has sometimes been charged with pantheism. For this reason it is a somewhat difficult task to concentrate on one area of Edwards' thought because one inevitably ends up looking into a wide range of issues. Thus, in the effort to draw a circumference around the definition of the Edwardsean aesthetic sense, four areas will be addressed: Edwards' understanding of two different kinds of knowledge, the source of the aesthetic sense, the quality of the aesthetic sense, and the effects of the aesthetic sense. For Jonathan Edwards one can know things in their imagination speculatively and they can know things completely in an

¹ Sang Hyun Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988) 154.

aesthetic experience. This aesthetic knowledge comes directly from God and is a deeper kind of knowing which has a purifying effect upon all imaginative knowledge.

Two Kinds of Knowledge

For Jonathan Edwards all knowledge begins with God. Knowing, is lovingly knowing God and is man's *raison detre*. The depth of this knowing is the end for which humans are here on earth and what gives humanity any meaningfulness.² Edwards answer to the question of how one can know this neither resorts to a total confidence in the power of reason alone nor appeals to a blind self-reliance in one's own individual experience. His answer is that there are two kinds of knowledge, an imaginative knowledge and an aesthetic knowledge.³ He uses various terms for both of these kinds of knowledge such as, the "sense of the mind" and the "sense of the heart" or the "notional or speculative knowledge" and the "sensible knowledge."

Simply stated, the imaginative knowledge is "all the modes of mere discerning, judging or speculation...without any proper ideal view, only by signs."⁴ The aesthetic knowledge is "all ideal views of value, good, beauty and excellence."⁵ In order to understand the way Edwards is forming his definitions, it is important to know what way he is using words like "idea," "signs," and "sense."

Edwards employs much of the terminology which is eminent in the philosophical writings of John Locke,⁶ whom Edwards sometimes directly refers to by name. Edwards embraces much of what Locke says, though he goes beyond him, marking significant differences. He agrees with Locke that much knowledge is of signs.⁷ Signs are language or words which are substitutes for the ideas they represent. These signs are not the ideas themselves but vehicles to the ideas

² Douglas J. Elwood, The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960) 113.

³ Jonathan Edwards does use the term "imagination" in regards to the first type of knowledge, though not frequently. However, as far as I know he does not use the term "aesthetic" in regards to the second type of knowledge. I have borrowed both the terms from Sang Hyun Lee for purposes of consistency and clarity in this paper since Edwards uses so many different terms to describes these two different types of knowledge.

⁴ Jonathan Edwards, The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 1, "Religious Affections," ed. Edward Hickman (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003) 272.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Norman Fiering, Jonathan Edwards and Moral Thought in its British Context (Williamsburg, Virg.: University of North Carolina Press, 1981)125.

⁷ Elwood, The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards, 115.

which cloud a true vision of them. Without the ideas, signs are just “empty words, mere sounds.”⁸

The Edwardsean scholar, Perry Miller, summarizes,

“The essence of Locke’s theory is that language, like government is artificial. It resets upon contract and neither vocabulary nor syntax have any inherent organic rationale. By themselves words are only noises, having no transcendental or preternatural correspondence with ideas. Words are just sensible marks.”⁹

Signs point to ideas, and become a part of a person’s knowledge through the senses. The senses are the five external senses of human beings, hearing, seeing, tasting, smelling, and touching.

Edwards agrees with Locke, that knowledge does come through the senses, which is formed in signs. Where Edwards disagrees with Locke is in his belief that ideas *can be* directly known. Locke affirmed that meaning, the ideas in themselves, are arbitrary since they are obscured by signs which come through the senses in social convention.¹⁰ Jonathan Edwards goes beyond Locke by acknowledging that there are two different types of knowledge, one (the imaginative) which is from the senses detached from the ideas themselves in the form of signs, and a second type (the aesthetic) which enlivens all the senses to a direct view of ideas and is not from them.

The imaginative knowledge is a governing endeavor of the faculties of the mind and the will. Sang Hyun Lee states that it is “the mind’s dispositional activity of ordering ideas as an act of judgment and thus an act of cognition.”¹¹ Its cognitive function is a mode of discerning, analyzing, and perceiving causes and effects.¹² It is a theoretical use of reason derived from sense data supplied by the physical senses.¹³ It is imaginative in that it occurs in the imagination of the mind and wherein it decides and thus causes acts of the will. It deals with notions and speculations and deciphers between them. Imaginative knowledge is that which is known through the thinking process of the mind. The imaginative knowledge in the thought of Jonathan Edwards is made most clear in the way he distinguishes it from the aesthetic knowledge. The

⁸ Ibid., 117.

⁹ Perry Miller, Critical Essays on Jonathan Edwards, “Edwards, Locke, and the Rhetoric of Sensation,” ed. William J. Scheick (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co.: 1980) 121.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Lee, The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards, 146.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Elwood, The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards, 120, 124.

first thing to recognize about the aesthetic knowledge which differentiates it from imaginative knowledge is its source.

The Source of Aesthetic Knowledge

The source of imaginative knowledge is signs which merely represent ideas. These signs are known through the senses, which thereby includes everything ever heard, seen, touched, tasted and smelled. Aesthetic knowledge is a direct knowledge of the ideas in themselves as they truly are. Sound, feeling, touch, taste, and smell are signs themselves and thus are not the ideas that they represent. Aesthetic knowledge is uninhibited by the fog of signs and thereby can truly hear, see, feel, touch, and taste.

Since the external senses only give signs which contain a detached knowledge of the ideas in the imagination, the aesthetic knowledge cannot come from the senses. Its source cannot be through any sign given by any of the natural senses. Edwards distrusts the natural capacity of reason.¹⁴ Reasoning is part of the activity of the imaginative knowledge and is inadequate to bring a unification between the sign and the thing signified. For example, Edwards illustrates that someone can have the sign of the idea of God in their mind, but have no experience of Him. Edwards argues that there is “no substitute for first-hand experience,”¹⁵ which is a “self-evident and certain knowledge...received through direct contact.”¹⁶ Since the natural abilities of a person are impaired,¹⁷ the source of aesthetic knowledge must be supernatural.¹⁸

Edwards argues that God is the supernatural source. In his sermon titled “A Divine and Supernatural Light Immediately Imparted to the Soul by the Spirit of God, Shown to Be Both a Scriptural and Rational Doctrine” he states, “God is the author of all knowledge and understanding whatsoever.”¹⁹ Imaginative reason teaches us that all ideas have causes and that

¹⁴ William J. Wainwright, Reason and the Heart: A Prolegomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason (London: Cornell University Press, 1995) 7.

¹⁵ Ibid., 118.

¹⁶ Lee, The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards, 148.

¹⁷ Edwards not only gives philosophical support for the incapacities of imaginative knowledge but in two books, *Original Sin* and *The Nature of True Virtue*, spends much effort to show that such incapacity is an issue of mankind’s moral depravity.

¹⁸ Wainwright, Reason and the Heart: A Prolegomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason, 50.

¹⁹ Jonathan Edwards, The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 2, “A Divine and Supernatural Light Immediately Imparted to the Soul by the Spirit of God, Shown to Be Both a Scriptural and Rational Doctrine,” ed. Edward Hickman (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003) 12.

as causes are traced backward we find that there must be one uncaused cause, God.²⁰ God is the one idea in whom all other ideas are sourced. When an idea is seen directly through the aesthetic sense it seen in its source and relation to God.

The helplessness of imaginative knowledge to bring about aesthetic knowledge means only God can bring about the aesthetic knowledge, no human can cause themselves to have it. Edwards comments on the failure of humanity to have this knowledge by themselves. He states, "The best reasoner in the world...might be led into the grossest errors and contradictions."²¹ God must bring about aesthetic knowledge.²² Thus, when God wills for one to have aesthetic knowledge, He communicates Himself to the soul by the Holy Spirit to bring an immediate light.²³ Immediate light is direct knowledge of ideas. This direct knowledge of ideas is aesthetic knowledge. It is unmediated by any signs, sees ideas as they are distinctively related to God and sees with an infinitely superior quality. It is in the quality of aesthetic knowledge wherein its nature is most clearly elucidated.

The Quality of Aesthetic Knowledge

The quality of aesthetic knowledge is vastly greater than imaginative knowledge. Earlier, aesthetic knowledge was defined as "all ideal views of value, good, beauty and excellence." The extent to which this definition pertains can be seen in three different, though interrelated, areas: in actuality and proportion, in affection, and in participation.

The first superior quality of aesthetic knowledge is in its actuality and proportion. The actuality of the aesthetic knowledge is its direct view of ideas.²⁴ Though Jonathan Edwards did understand that words were signs, he believed that they were signs of true ideas. He states, "A child should be taught to understand things as well as words."²⁵ The aesthetic knowledge is actual in that it is as Douglas J. Elwood says, "not a faded idea impression of the real object or a

²⁰ Edwards appeals often appeals to and applies the cosmological argument for the existence of God in various discourses.

²¹ Jonathan Edwards, The Philosophy of Jonathan Edwards from His Private Notebooks, "Miscellanies," ed. Harvey G. Townsend (Eugene, Ore.: University of Oregon Monographs, 1955) 185-186.

²² Elwood, The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards, 134.

²³ Ibid., 137.

²⁴ Lee, The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards, 154.

²⁵ Quoted in Miller, "Edwards, Locke, and the Rhetoric of Sensation," 128.

mere copy of an original...but a penetrating insight into the real nature."²⁶ The aesthetic goes behind the intention directing what is revealed in all sense data and sees the idea as it truly is.

In regards to proportion, the aesthetic knowledge is of an infinitely greater quality because it sees ideas in their relation to the "infinite excellency of God."²⁷ It is a qualitatively enhanced knowledge, not by private revelation but by illumination, so that there is a higher appreciation of beauty and value already known to the mind."²⁸ Such quality is irreducible, infinitely great. This perception is an activity whereby the image of God is imparted into the understanding of the subject.²⁹ All ideas, especially God, are seen in correct proportion. God, the infinite and greatest idea is seen as He is and all other ideas are seen in proportion to their relationship with Him. In the aesthetic knowledge the mind perceives glory and excellency and all ideas are seen as divine things.³⁰

The second superior quality of aesthetic knowledge is in its affection. Aesthetic knowledge in Edwards is a "sensible knowledge" wherein the affections are made to sense. It is sometimes called the "new sense," David J. Lyttle even calls it a sixth sense.³¹ It is a new sense in that it is a new capacity for being affected by the things of God.³² It does not come through any new sense organ or through any sense data. Rather it is a "supraphysical sense," a *donum superadditum*, a higher and deeper sense of knowledge.³³ The affection, which are emotions, are what sense and this sensing occurs in the heart.³⁴

Throughout all Jonathan Edwards writings he insists that "practical religion" is "experimental religion" that engages the heart.³⁵ Often times in Edwards writings he seems to

²⁶ Elwood, The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards, 126.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 132.

²⁹ Lee, The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards, 159.

³⁰ Ibid., 155.

³¹ David J. Lyttle, "The Sixth Sense of Jonathan Edwards," Church Quarterly Review, 167 (1966): 50-59.

³² Fiering, Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought and Its British Context, 126.

³³ Elwood, The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards, 124.

³⁴ Miller, "Edwards, Locke, and the Rhetoric of Sensation," 130-1.

³⁵ In particular, Edwards devotes a whole book to the topic titled, *The Religious Affections*.

have very similar conceptions of the mind and the heart.³⁶ Yet, overall it appears as though the mind most refers to the entire self and the heart is the mind's pleasure or displeasure.

Pleasure or displeasure is key to understanding the aesthetic knowledge. In aesthetic knowledge there is a spiritual experience or illumination wherein knowledge has a taste of real appreciation. Jonathan Edwards describes it in one place as "a holy taste and appetite (which) leads to thoughts of that which is truly lovely."³⁷ In another place he says it is "a kind of inward tasting or feeling, of sweetness or pleasure."³⁸ As William J. Wainwright says, "Pleasure and pain are not qualities or dimensions of more complex experiences. They are discrete internal sensations...unordinarily spiritual."³⁹ In this way all the natural sense organs are like parables speaking about the great aesthetic spiritual knowledge wherein the heart is supremely affected. These affections of extreme pleasure and delight spring from a clear view of God as He is in His beauty, goodness, value, excellence and in all other things which proceed from Him.

The third superior quality of aesthetic knowledge is participation. Through aesthetic knowledge the whole human person is enabled to function in the way in which they were intended to function.⁴⁰ The knowledge is not partial nor a passive participation, in which one part of the person is made aware and the rest is not. Through aesthetic knowledge the whole man perceives.⁴¹ As Elwood states, it "involves an active participation of the total self."⁴² In this full participation the imagination and aesthetic understanding converge in an "integrated event of immediate sensation."⁴³ In such moments, the mind becomes fully engaged in understanding and moves the will to inclination.⁴⁴ It is the opposite of rationality being ruled out but instead it is the mind being made to function in its highest potential. The mind is made to grasp the real meaning and significance of things and is moved to action. All bifurcation and disjointedness is

³⁶ Lee, The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards, 155.

³⁷ Edwards, Religious Affections, 283.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 272.

³⁹ Wainwright, Reason and the Heart: A Prolegomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason, 25.

⁴⁰ Lovingly knowing God, see n. 2.

⁴¹ Lee, The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards, 127.

⁴² Elwood, The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards, 135.

⁴³ Lee, The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards, 163.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 153.

eliminated and a person is propelled to act based upon the desires or inclinations produced from having such high thoughts in their mind.

The quality of aesthetic knowledge is enormously greater than imaginative knowledge in its actual vision and thereby proportion, in its divine affections and in its participation by the whole person. When this aesthetic knowledge is imparted a number of effects occur in the human person.

The Effects of Aesthetic Knowledge

Many effects of the aesthetic knowledge have been referred to throughout the attempt to define it. However, there are two main effects of the aesthetic knowledge in the human person, which need a little clarification and additional attention. One main effect is a sanctifying or purifying of the mind and a second, equally important effect, is a movement of the human being to action because of the changed state of mind.

The effect upon the mind is one which enables it to be truly objective in its thought.⁴⁵ The spiritual sense of aesthetic knowledge enables truth propositions that are logically or epistemically related to be properly recognized as divine things.⁴⁶ It thus makes it possible for one to have a right grasp of doctrine not only by having the appropriate corresponding affections but also by effecting the imaginative knowledge so that it governs or judges properly. Jonathan Edwards states,

The ideas themselves, which otherwise are dim and obscure, by this means have a light cast upon them, and are impressed with greater strength, so that the mind can be a better judge of them.⁴⁷

Through the aesthetic knowledge the limitations of the imaginative knowledge are overcome and purified, so that reasonable evidence may be weighed accurately.

The other effect of aesthetic knowledge, which is really a bi-product of the first effect, is that the true apprehension in the mind causes an inclination of the will to be moved to action.⁴⁸ The passions and desires aroused in the aesthetic knowledge lead one to act in light of them.⁴⁹ Since the aesthetic knowledge is one which receives a full view of all the goodness of God and is

⁴⁵ Elwood, The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards, 119.

⁴⁶ Wainwright, Reason and the Heart: A Prolegomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason, 30.

⁴⁷ Edwards, Religious Affections, 307.

⁴⁸ Elwood, The Philosophical Thought of Jonathan Edwards, 120.

⁴⁹ Fiering, Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought and Its British Context, 123.

delighted in it, the actions that proceed from that view are morally pleasing actions before God, the self, and fellow man.

Conclusion

The epistemology of Jonathan Edwards is wrapped up in his understanding of two different kinds of knowledge, imaginative knowledge and aesthetic knowledge. Imaginative knowledge has been shown to be the kind of knowledge wherein one judges between things according to the signs which are presented to them through the senses. Aesthetic knowledge has been shown to be a direct experiential knowledge different from imaginative knowledge in many ways. Its source is not through the senses but from God alone. It has a superior quality in relation to imaginative knowledge in: its ability to directly encounter, in right proportion, the ideal without signs; in its ability have pleasing affections; and in its ability to enable the whole person to participate. Lastly, aesthetic knowledge was shown to have two important effects: the advancing of the mind to a purified state of governing and the causing of an impetus of will toward moral actions.

In a day of confusion concerning postmodernism, modernism, and now postpostmodernism, the epistemic function of the Edwardsean aesthetic sense provides some powerful answers. Though developed over two-hundred years ago, Edwards anticipates contemporary apprehension about issues like language, confidence in reason, psychological and moral phenomena, subjective relativism, emotional mysticism, and many other things. By recognizing two different forms of knowledge and showing the relationship between the two, Edwards provides a platform for both reason and experience. Epistemically, “nothing is violated or totally transcended,”⁵⁰ but everything is given a rightful place. For Jonathan Edwards, we can know we know first through an imaginative knowledge and then fully through an aesthetic knowledge when God so wills to impart it, and this is the end for which He made the world. As Edwards himself stated,

Knowledge or understanding is a thing worthy to be; and if any knowledge, then the most excellent sort of knowledge, viz., that of God and His glory. The existence of the created universe consists as much in it as in anything.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Lee, The Philosophical Thought of Jonathan Edwards, 165.

⁵¹ Jonathan Edwards, The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 1, “The End for which God Created the World,” ed. Edward Hickman (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003) 99.

Bibliography

- Edwards, Jonathan. The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 2, "A Divine and Supernatural Light Immediately Imparted to the Soul by the Spirit of God, Shown to Be Both a Scriptural and Rational Doctrine," ed. Edward Hickman. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003.
- Edwards, Jonathan. The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 1, "The End for Which God Created the World," ed. Edward Hickman. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003.
- Edwards, Jonathan. The Philosophy of Jonathan Edwards from His Private Notebooks, "Miscellanies," ed. Harvey G. Townsend. Eugene, Ore.: University of Oregon Monographs, 1955.
- Edwards, Jonathan. The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 1, "Religious Affections," ed. Edward Hickman. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson,
- Elwood, Douglas J. The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards. New York: Columbia University Press, 1960.
- Fiering, Norman. Jonathan Edwards and Moral Thought in its British Context. Williamsburg, Virg.: University of North Carolina Press, 1981.
- Lee, Sang Hyun. The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988.
- Lyttle, David J. "The Sixth Sense of Jonathan Edwards," Church Quarterly Review 167 (1966): 50-59.
- Miller, Perry. Critical Essays on Jonathan Edwards, "Edwards, Locke, and the Rhetoric of Sensation," ed. William J. Scheick. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co.: 1980.
- Wainwright, William J. Reason and the Heart: A Prolegomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason. London: Cornell University Press, 1995.