

"A New World": Philosophical Idealism in America, 1700 to 1950"

Lecture II

1. *Descartes on conservation as continuous creation*

A lifespan can be divided into countless parts, each completely independent of the others, so that it does not follow from the fact that I existed a little while ago that I must exist now, unless there is some cause which as it were creates me afresh at this moment—that is, which preserves me. For it is quite clear to anyone who attentively considers the nature of time that the same power and action are needed to preserve anything at each individual moment of its duration as would be required to create that thing anew if it were not yet in existence. Hence the distinction between preservation and creation is only a conceptual one, and this is one of the things that are evident by the natural light. (Third Meditation, translated by John Cottingham)

2. *Berkeley's affirmation of the doctrine*

Those who have all along contended for a material world have yet acknowledged that *natura naturans* (to use the language of the Schoolmen) is God; and that the divine conservation is equipollent to, and in fact the same thing with, a continued repeated creation: in a word, that conservation and creation differ only in the *terminus a quo* ["point from which": the circumstance in which the two acts take place]. These are the common opinions of the Schoolmen, and Durandus, who held the world to be a machine like a clock, put in motion by God, but afterwards continuing to go of itself, was therein particular, and had few followers. . . . The Stoics and Platonists are everywhere full of the same notion. I am not therefore singular in this point itself, so much as in my way of proving it. . . . For aught I can see, it is no disparagement to the perfection of God to say that all things necessarily depend on Him as their Conservator as well as Creator, and that all nature would shrink to nothing, if not upheld and preserved in being by the same force that first created it. (Letter to Johnson, 1729; see also *Principles* 46)

3. *Suarez on the distinction between creation and conservation*

It is easy to understand the conceptual distinction between creation and conservation. For the very difference between the relevant ways of speaking indicates that there is at least a conceptual distinction here, given that an entity (i) is not said to be conserved at the first instant at which it is created and (ii) is not said to be created at the first instant during the rest of the time in which it is conserved. Therefore, there is at least some sort of conceptual distinction between the two.

This distinction is none other than the one mentioned above, namely that 'creation' connotes a denial of previously possessed *esse*, whereas 'conservation,' to the contrary, connotes the possession of the same *esse* that was previously had.

'Creation' connotes a denial of previously possessed *esse*, whereas 'conservation', to the contrary, connotes the possession of the same *esse* that was previously had. Now the claim that this is only a conceptual difference seems evident *per se* and is made readily obvious by an analogy derived from the terminus itself. For the created effect itself *qua* existing at the first moment can only be conceptually distinguished from itself *qua* existing in the whole of the subsequent time. (*Disputation* 21, translated by A. J. Freddoso)

4. *Edwards's statement and defense of the doctrine*

That God does, by his immediate power, *uphold* every created substance in being, will be manifest, if we consider, that their present existence is a *dependent* existence, and therefore is an *effect*, and must have some *cause*: and the cause must be one of these two: either the *antecedent existence* of the same substance, or else the *power of the Creator*. But it can't be the antecedent existence of the same substance. For instance, the existence of the body of the moon at this present moment, can't be the effect of its existence at the last foregoing moment. For not only was what existed the last moment, no active cause, but a wholly passive thing; this also is to be considered, that no cause can produce effects in a *time* and *place* on which itself is *not*. 'Tis plain, nothing can exert itself, or operate, when and where it is not existing. But the moon's past existence was neither *where* nor *when* its present existence *is*. In point of time, what is *past* entirely ceases, when *present* existence begins; otherwise it would not be *past*. The past moment is ceased and gone, when the present moment takes place; and does no more coexist with it, than does any other moment that had ceased twenty years ago. Nor could the past existence of the particles of this moving body produce effects in any other place, than where it then was. But its existence at the present moment, in every point of it, is in a different place, from where its existence was at the last preceding moment. From these things, I suppose, it will certainly follow, that the present existence, either of this, or any other created substance, cannot be an effect of its past existence. The existences (so to speak) of an effect, or thing dependent, in different parts of space or duration, though every so *near* one to another, don't at all coexist one with the other; and therefore are as truly different effects, as if those parts of space and duration were every so far asunder: and the prior existence can no more be the proper cause of the new existence, in the next moment, or next part of space, than if it had been in an age before, or at a thousand miles distance, without any existence to fill up the intermediate time or space. Therefore the existence of created substances, in each successive moment, must be the effect of the *immediate* agency, will, and power of God. (*Original Sin*, pp. 400-1)

5. *Determinism as a consequence of the principle of sufficient reason*

As to all things that *begin to be*, they are not self-existent, and therefore must have some foundation of their existence without [that is, outside or distinct from] themselves. That whatsoever begins to be, which before was not, must have a cause why it then begins to exist, seems to be the first dictate of the common and natural sense which God hath implanted in the minds of all mankind, and the main foundation of all our reasonings about the existence of things, past, present, or to come. (Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*)

6. *Edwards on the metaphysics of identity, stage one: the distinctness of things "simply considered" or "considered in themselves"*

The matter may perhaps be in some respects still more clearly illustrated by this. The images of things in a glass, as we keep our eye upon them, seem to remain precisely the same, with a continuing perfect identity. But it is known to be otherwise. Philosophers well know, that these images are constantly renewed, by the impression and reflection of new rays of light; so that the image impressed by the former rays is constantly vanishing, and a new image impressed by new rays every moment, both on the glass and on the eye. The image constantly renewed, by new successive rays, is no more numerically the same, than if it were by some artist put on anew with a pencil, and the colors constantly vanishing as fast as put on. And the new images being put on *immediately* or instantly, don't make 'em the same, any more than if it were done with the intermission of an hour or a day. The image that exists this moment, is not at all derived from the image which existed the last preceding moment: as may be seen,

because, if the succession of new rays be intercepted, by something interposed . . . ; the *past existence* of the image has no influence to uphold it, so much as for one moment. Which shows, that the image is altogether new-made every moment; and strictly speaking, is in no part numerically the same with that which existed the moment preceding. And truly so the matter must be with the bodies themselves, as well as their images: they also cannot be the same, with an absolute identity, but must be wholly renewed every moment, if the case be as has been proved, that their present existence is not, strictly speaking, at all the effect of their past existence; but is wholly, every instant, the effect of a new agency, or exertion of the power, of the cause of their existence. If so, the existence caused is every instant a new effect, whether the cause be light, or immediate divine power, or whatever it be. (*Original Sin*, p. 404)

7. *The second stage: making distinct things one*

Intrinsically distinct beings are sometimes "so united by the established law of the Creator, in some respects and with regard to some purposes and effects, that by virtue of that establishment it is with them as if they were one" (*Original Sin*, p. 397).

Unification (which Edwards labels "oneness" or even "sameness") v. numerical identity

Things are unified in one or another respect (or in many).

Their unification is purpose-relative.

It becomes "as if" they were one.

They are "dealt with" or treated as one.

Why I can't be punished for my parent's sins, or for yours, even if I can be punished for Adam's (Original Sin, p. 408).

Is numerical identity absolute identity (on which see the note on p. 406)?

So the body of a man at forty years of age, is one 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 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.

Again, the body and soul of a man are one, in a very different manner, and for different purposes. Considered in themselves, they are exceeding different beings, of a nature as diverse as can be conceived; and yet, by a very peculiar divine constitution or law of nature, which God has been pleased to establish, they are strongly united, and become one, in most respects; a wonderful mutual communication is established; so that both become different parts of the same man. But the union and mutual communication they have, has existence, and is entirely regulated and limited, according to the sovereign pleasure of God, and the constitution he has been pleased to establish. (*Original Sin*, p. 398)

8. *The third stage: personal identity*

Though [personal identity] be not allowed to consist wholly in that which Mr. Locke places it in, i.e. *same consciousness*, yet I think it can't be denied, that this is one thing essential to it. But 'tis evident that the communication or continuance of the same consciousness and memory to any subject, through successive parts of duration, depends wholly on a divine establishment. There would be no necessity, that the remembrance and ideas of what is past should continue to exist, but by an arbitrary constitution of the Creator. (*Original Sin*, pp. 398-9)

From these things it will clearly follow, that identity of consciousness depends wholly on a law of nature; and so, on the sovereign will and agency of God; and therefore, that personal identity, and so the derivation of pollution and built of past sins in the same person, depends on an arbitrary divine constitution: and this, even though we should allow the same consciousness not to be the only thing which constitutes oneness of person, but should, besides that, suppose sameness of substance requisite. For if same consciousness be one thing necessary to personal identity, and this depends on God's sovereign constitution, it will still follow, that personal identity depends on God's sovereign constitution. (p. 399)

9. *The fourth and final stage: created substances—atoms or souls*

And with respect to the identity of created substance itself, in the different moments of its duration, I think, we shall greatly mistake, if we imagine it to be like that absolute independent identity of the first being, whereby "he is the same yesterday, today, and forever." Nay, on the contrary, it may be demonstrated, that even this oneness of created substance, existing at different times, is a merely *dependent* identity; dependent on the pleasure and sovereign constitution of him who worketh all in all. This will follow from what is generally allowed, and is certainly true, that God not only created all things, and gave them being at first, but continually preserves them, and upholds them in being. This being a matter of considerable importance, it may be worthy here to be considered with a little attention. (*Original Sin*, pp. 399-400)

If the existence of created substance in each successive moment, be wholly the effect of God's immediate power, in that moment, without any dependence on prior existence, as much as the first creation out of nothing, then what exists at this moment, by this power, is a *new effect*; and simply and absolutely considered, not the same with any past existence, though it be like it, and follows it according to a certain established method. And there is no identity or oneness in the case, but what depends on the *arbitrary* constitution of the Creator; who by his wise sovereign establishment so unites these successive new effects, that he *treats them as one*, by communicating to them like properties, relations, and circumstances; and so, leads us to regard and treat them as one. (pp. 402-3)

There are *various kinds* of identity and oneness, found among created things, by which they become one in different manners, respects and degrees, and to various purposes; several of which differences have been observed; and every kind is ordered, regulated, and limited, in every respect, by divine constitution. Some things, existing in different times and places, are treated by their Creator as one in *one respect*, and others in *another*; some are united for this communication, and others for that; but all according to the sovereign pleasure of the Fountain of all being and operation. (p. 405)

I am persuaded, no solid reason can be given, why God, who constitutes all other created union or oneness, according to his pleasure, and for what purposes, communications, and effects he pleases, may not establish a constitution whereby the

natural posterity of Adam, proceeding from him, much as the buds and branches from the stock or root of a tree, should be treated as one with him, for the derivation, either of righteousness and communion in rewards, or of the loss of righteousness and consequent corruption and guilt. (p. 405)

10. *Is Edwards an "identity voluntarist"?*

It appears that this [Pelagian] objection is built on a false hypothesis: for it appears, that a *divine constitution* is the thing which *makes truth*, in affairs of this nature. (*Original Sin*, p. 404)

Passages from Mark Johnston, Surviving Death (Princeton University Press, 2010):

Edwards holds that we have no natural capacity to continue to exist.

To this Edwards adds that it is entirely up to God how to constitute a persisting person out of such momentary stages.

Edwards seems to be endorsing something like the view that "created substances" persist by perduring, that is, by having distinct momentary stages at the various times at which they exist. So, once again, we are to think of a body as a cross-temporal sum of momentary body stages united by a certain genidentity condition, that is, a condition that bundles together those momentary stages into a persisting whole.

God wills that these body stages and only these body stages make up a body!

[This severs identity] from any real conception of justice.

If I am told that the fact that I was that body holds just in virtue of "arbitrary divine constitution," that is, just in virtue of God's deciding to bundle together the stages of the mischievous boy with the rest of the stages of my life, then I am taken aback. The fact that it was I who did it is now being claimed to consist in the fact about God's arbitrary and sovereign will. How then can I justly be asked to take my lumps for the acts of that mischievous boy? God has, as it were, just foisted those acts on me; so also for "my" good acts.

12. *The divine constitution of identity: two steps or three?*

And there is no identity or oneness in the case, but what depends on the *arbitrary* constitution of the Creator; who by his wise sovereign establishment so united these successive new effects, that he *treats them as one*, by communicating to them like properties, relations, and circumstances; and so, leads us to regard and treat them as one. When I call this an arbitrary constitution, I mean, that it is a constitution which depends on nothing but the divine will; which *divine will* depends on nothing but the *divine wisdom*. (*Original Sin*, pp. 402-3)

Step one: Creating (and conserving) simple substances

Step two: Endowing them with qualities and relations.

Step three: "Treating" them as one.

What is it for God to treat things as one?

Is it simply to endow them with the qualities and relations mentioned in my

description of step two? On Edwards's use of the "by" locution.

Is it merely for God to regard them as one, in the confident expectation that we will do the same? (Identity as "subjective," or what Hume might call a "fiction"—but in this case, a divinely instituted fiction.)

Is it for God to adopt a certain schedule of punishments and rewards (a schedule based on the qualities and relations of step two)?

Is it to make them one in fact?

The sin of the first apostacy . . . , in reality and in propriety, shall become *their* sin; by virtue of a real union between the root and branches of the world of mankind (truly and properly availing to such a consequence) established by the Author of the whole system of the universe; to whose establishment is owing all propriety and reality of union, in any part of that system And therefore the sin of the apostacy is not theirs, merely because God *imputes* it to them; but it is *truly* and *properly* theirs, and on that ground, God imputes it to them. (*Original Sin*, pp. 407-8)

If it is to make them one in fact, how is this achieved? Is it brought about by concepts or eternal truths independent of God's will, or are the relevant concepts or truths divinely instituted? On the first alternative, there is really no separate third step for God to take.

Can God's bringing about of unity be construed as the creation of a new entity—as the creation of (say) a person, distinct from the simple substances that underlie it?

12. *Replication and fission in Edwards's early manuscripts*

It is a mistake that it consists in sameness or identity of consciousness, if by sameness of consciousness be meant having the same ideas hereafter that I have now, with a notion or apprehension that I had had them before, just in the same manner as I now have the same ideas that I had in time past by memory. It is possible without doubt in the nature of things for God to annihilate me, and after my annihilation to create another being that shall have the same ideas in his mind that I have, and with the like apprehension that he had had them before in like manner as a person has by memory; and yet I be in no way concerned in it, having no reason to fear what that being shall suffer, or to hope for what he shall enjoy.

Can anyone deny that it is possible, after my annihilation, to create two beings in the universe, both of them having my ideas communicated to them with such a notion of their having had them before, after the manner of memory, and yet be ignorant one of another? And in such case, will anyone say that both these are one and the same person, as they must be if they are both the same person with me? It is possible there may be two such beings, each having all the ideas that are now in my mind in the same manner that I should have by memory if my own being were continued, and yet these two beings not only be ignorant one of another, but also be in a very different state, one in a state of enjoyment and pleasure and the other in a state of great suffering and torment. ("The Mind," pp. 385-6 in *Scientific and Philosophical Writings*)