Abstract
This paper argues that Jonathan Edwards developed idealism from the instruction he received and conveyed in logic, ethics, physics and metaphysics. His view of the direct perception of mind with its ideas and the indirect perception of matter provided the basis for a dualism between mind and matter and the necessary condition of the distinction between the ideal and the material world.¹

A Perennially Intriguing Problem
Jonathan Edwards is generally acknowledged to be one of the most prominent American philosophers. Although much scholarship has been devoted to his idealism, Norman Fiering calls “the sources of Edwards’ youthful metaphysical idealism, that perennially intriguing problem in American intellectual history.”² In this paper I seek to show how Edwards’ idealism grew out of his studies, teaching and research. His writings show his endorsement of early eighteenth-century notions and experiments, and from this general philosophical framework Edwards developed idealism—just as John Norris, Arthur Collier, George Berkeley, (the American) Samuel Johnson and a host of other contemporary thinkers did something similar.³ His arrival at or development of idealism is thus not intriguing, if by “intriguing” is meant something remarkable or curious.

¹The author is grateful for comments on earlier drafts of this material from Profs. Oliver Crisp, Paul Helm, Kenneth Minkema, Richard Muller, Douglas Sweeney, Dr. Jasper Reid, the Jonathan Edwards Centre at the Heidelberg University, the higher seminar for theoretical philosophy at the department of philosophy, Gothenburg University, and a philosophy seminar at L’Abri, Mölle.


Earlier Research into Edwards’ Idealism

The problem of Edwards’ idealism seems partly to be perennial because of misunderstandings in earlier scholarship. In this section I seek to straighten out some of these.

Edwards formulated his ontology most succinctly in the following way: “all existence is perception.”4 Paul Ramsey, Perry Miller, William Morris and Sang Hyun Lee flatly contradict this by claiming that “Jonathan Edwards’ idealism was not Berkeley’s ‘to be is to be perceived.’”5 Edwards’ consistent adherence to the view that existence is perception throughout his life has similarly been denied. Even if this did not contradict the many references to Edwards’ writings above, it would not be strange if Edwards did not express his view throughout his life, since he hesitated to publish his idealism for fear of opposition.7 Theodore Hornberger notes that Edwards’ use of “familiar analogies and dialectic” made “the average reader” interpret him “as utterly untouched by any speculation outside of Scriptural exegesis.”8 Although Edwards probably did not know that the former Yale tutor Samuel Johnson had to defend his idealism in correspondence between 1745 and 1747,9 he must have guessed that idealism would upset his colleagues and parishioners generally. According to Anderson, “for all his reluctance to submit the claim to public scrutiny in his published writings, Edwards seems to have remained fast in his conviction that consciousness, involving perception and knowledge, is necessary for the existence of anything whatever.”10

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7 Note, for instance, the introductions to “Natural Philosophy” and “Of the Prejudices of the Imagination” in WJE 6: 192-95, 196-98.


If these misunderstandings can be left aside, then we can focus on the background of Edwards’ idealism. Here many scholars have defended the influence of one thinker on Edwards. Their source material is scarce and the argument reductionist. Contrary to a mass of research it has recently even been claimed of Edwards “not having any firsthand knowledge of the main figures of Western philosophy.” According to Fiering’s apt description: “Edwards has been too often pictured as an isolated mental giant, nourished only by the near-miraculous circumstance of his early exposure to Locke and Newton. Instead he ought to be seen in the larger context of the Atlantic intellectual community in the first half of the eighteenth century.”

Still, a disproportionate amount of research has in particular been spent on Edwards’ possible relation to Berkeley. Although Lyon’s claim in *L’Idéalisme* that Edwards relied on Berkeley is generally discredited, their similarities still tempt scholars to find a connection. For example, Edwards’ writings indicate, according to Anderson, that he had read George Berkeley’s *An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision* (1709) sometime between 1726 and 1729. However, although it paved the way for Berkeley’s developed idealism in *Of the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710), his *New Theory of Vision* appears not to have been as influential as has sometimes been claimed: “In sum, the alleged success of Berkeley’s theory of vision must be seen as the success of a severely truncated version of his theory.” Marsden suggests with a reference to Minkema that “Edwards may have even met Berkeley on a trip to Newport in 1731”, but Minkema says nothing about such a meeting. Still, contrary to Smyth and Miller, Berkeley’s *A New Theory of Vision* as well as his *Principles* and *Alciphron* are

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actually in Edwards’ reading list.\(^7\) However, Edwards never referred to Berkeley and none of his works are found in the “Account Book” where Edwards registered his books on loan to friends.\(^8\) Edwards most likely read Berkeley’s anonymous essays in the first volume of *The Guardian* he owned.\(^9\) Yet, Edwards’ concealment of his idealism from fear of opposition may be taken as evidence for his independent development. For if he had known in the formative years that a host of others had arrived at similar conclusions from the same sources, he could have appealed to them for acceptance. However, this is not to deny, for instance, that there are “remarkable” and “striking thematic continuities” between Berkeley’s objections to moral sense theory in *Alciphron* and Edwards’ ones in *True Virtue*\(^{10}\) as well as notable parallels in their logic, physics and metaphysics. Yet, emphasis on the similarities can obscure the dissimilarities. For instance, whereas Berkeley refers to the overcoming of skepticism and atheism in the development of his idealism, Edwards does not.\(^{11}\) Edwards endorses while Berkeley rejects Locke’s account of abstraction.\(^{12}\) They held to reversed relations between the senses of sight and touch.\(^{13}\) Edwards writes that his natural philosophy is “exceedingly beside the ordinary way of thinking” but Berkeley says that his one is an “endeavour to vindicate Common Sense.”\(^{14}\) It is somewhat noteworthy in this connection that there is no evidence of any response by Edwards to (probably) the first comprehensive critique of Berkeley’s idealism by Andrew Baxter. Baxter published *An Enquiry into the Nature of the Human Soul* in 1733, and Edwards owned the third edition of 1745 at least by 1751\(^{25}\) and quoted it by 1754.\(^{26}\)


\(^8\) WJE 26: 310-56; cf. also Appendix D, WJE 26:430.


\(^14\) “Natural Philosophy,” WJE 6:193; Berkeley, *Dialogues* III.

\(^15\) Cf. WJE 26: 321.

In the hope of having cleared up some misunderstandings in earlier scholarship,²⁷ I think we can focus on the perennially intriguing problem of the *sources* of Edwards' idealism. Building on a few helpful studies on Edwards' intellectual development,²⁸ I will in the next section attempt to show how Edwards' idealism grew out of his studies, teaching and research.

*The Sources of Edwards' idealism*

The scholarship on Edwards' philosophical development has long suffered from the early editors' mistaken dates of most of his early manuscripts.²⁹ Fortunately, Thomas Schafer's analyses of the early manuscripts during the last half of the twentieth century has led to a revision of their dates, and consequently to a (more) correct account of Edwards' philosophical development.³⁰

“Records of Edwards' reading are incomplete,”³¹ but the main scope of Edwards' syllabus can be reconstructed from circumstantial evidence³² and the chief philosophical

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²⁹ For example, Smyth “Early Writings.”


influences can be inferred from his (early) writings. Edwards’s B.A. curriculum seems to have been almost identical with the Harvard one described by the tutor Henry Flynt in 1723, and his M.A. course seems to have been by individual arrangement just like the Harvard one. During the second half of the seventeenth century, Harvard had abandoned a traditional or broadly Aristotelian curriculum and adopted a modern or roughly Cartesian curriculum. At Yale, Williams was hostile towards traditional logic and metaphysics, and assigned modern textbooks to Edwards, which the latter inherited from his father’s studies at Harvard. Edwards’ context seems to have had many similarities with that group of seventeenth-century thinkers associated with the University of Cambridge (rather inaptly called “Cambridge Platonists”) who endorsed Cartesian dualism in anthropology and corpuscularianism in physics. His undergraduate course progressed from logic and ethics


35 Timothy Edwards graduated MA from Harvard in 1694, whereas Elisha Williams earned his BA in 1711 and his MA 1714. Williams was later an important rector of Yale; see Warch School of the Prophets, 132–36, 164–85; Kelley, Yale: A History, 37–45; and Franklin Bowditch Dexter, Sketch of the History of Yale University (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1887), 24–26.


38 Two of his logic compendia are published in Kennedy Aristotelian and Cartesian Logic at Harvard (Boston, Mass.: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1995).

to physics and metaphysics, while the graduate studies were planned individually.\(^{40}\) By the time of his graduate studies, Edwards also explored the best library in the colonies with its Dummer collection.\(^{41}\) When he became tutor the curriculum was much the same as during his own studentship\(^ {42}\) and he was also given the task of cataloguing the books of the college library, which enabled him to excerpt reviews and abstracts from a wide range of periodicals, dictionaries, and monographs.\(^ {43}\) So Edwards’ studies and teaching at Yale were transformative. This can be seen more particularly from how each major area of philosophy—logic, ethics, physics and metaphysics—is reflected in his writings; especially logic.\(^ {44}\)

Edwards received and conveyed instruction in logic based on longstanding (broadly) Cartesian textbooks.\(^ {45}\) Edwards’ tutors Elisha Williams and Timothy Cutler used Antoine Arnauld’s\(^ {46}\) and Pierre Nicole’s\(^ {46}\) *Logic or the Art of Thinking*,\(^ {46}\) which had been a textbook at Harvard at least since the early 1690s, so both Edwards and his father had a copy in their private libraries.\(^ {47}\) In addition Edwards employed William Brattle’s *Compendium of Logick* and Charles Morton’s *Logick System*, which were extracted from Arnauld’s and Nicole’s textbook as well as from Anthony LeGrand’s *An Entire Body of Philosophy According to the Principles of the Famous Renate Des Cartes* and used at Harvard between 1687 and 1767.\(^ {48}\) Oddly, Stephen Daniel misinterprets the logical framework to be Ramist rather than Cartesian, perhaps from

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\(^{40}\) Cf. Edwards’ letter to his father on July 24, 1719 in *WJE* 16:33, with Warch *School of the Prophets*, 211, n. 53.


\(^{44}\) Note, for instance, the many references to logic in Edwards’ “The Mind.”


mistaking bifurcation to proceed from Ramus rather than (at least as early as) Porphyry’s Isagoge.49 However, Edwards’ textbooks were clearly Cartesian and he had at least as tutor access to LeGrand’s standard work while he was teaching Brattle’s Compendium. Although Edwards’ compendium included a synopsis of George Downname’s Commentarii in P. Rami Dialecticam50 and Ramus’s book had earlier been a standard work in logic at Yale, it is unclear that it was still in use by his time.51 Even Morris emphasizes the importance of the Port Royal logic for Edwards,52 and Anderson contends that Cartesian logic was crucial in Edwards’ development of idealism.53 In this context, Edwards pursued epistemology on his own by reading (among others) the enlarged edition of Locke’s Essay, Malebranche’s Search after Truth and Isaac Watt’s Logick.54 These works were as much introductions to epistemology as to logic, and accomplished the so-called “epistemological turn” in European philosophy from the judgment that there is something to that something is known. Thus the object of knowledge is ideas rather than things. In Edwards’ words: “We immediately perceive nothing else but the ideas which are this moment extant in our minds. We perceive or know other things only by means of these, as necessarily connected with others, and dependent on them.”55 These immediately perceived ideas are caused by the impact of atoms on our sense organs and the motions thus generated are transmitted by the

51 Warch, School of the Prophets, 205-206.
52 Morris, Young Jonathan Edwards, 290-301.
nerves to the brain: "'Tis by impressions made on the brain, that any ideas are excited in the
mind, by the motion of the animal spirits, or any changes made in the body." These ideas are "perceptions," "images," "pictures," "resemblesances" or "representations" on or in the
brain that the mind senses: "An idea is only a perception wherein the mind is passive, or
rather, subjective." Likewise,

Ideas are images of things; and there are no other images of things, in the most proper
sense, but ideas, because other things are only called images as they beget an idea in us of
the thing of which they are the image; so that all other images of things are but images in a
secondary sense.18

This mechanical account of perception was generally accepted among scholars at the
time and influenced semantics, so that words were regarded as signifying pictures in the
brain—"their Audience in the Brain, the mind's Presence-room"19—that the mind
names. Thus, according to Edwards, humans understand and attend to the meaning of words
when they are "connecting any idea with them", since ideas are "properly signified by
words, naturally excited in their minds on hearing the words" and without ideas "the words
have no sense in thought to answer them."20 So, the meaning of a word is an idea, image or
picture. In logic, finally, Cartesians reduced types of predicates to mathematical or
geometrical ones, so that the predicate of substance is substituted by extension, the
predicates of quality, action and passion are revised to those of quantity, figure and motion,
and predicates of relation are transferred to "affection of reason" or modification of mind.21

Edwards argues against quantity, figure and motion and thus only relation to mind remains:
"For being, if we examine narrowly, is nothing else but proportion [relation]."22 Thus

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16 Religious Affections, WJE 2:290; similarly, Nature of True Virtue, WJE 8:566; "Of Insects," WJE 6:156;
"Things to be Considered," ibid., 220, 283; "Beauty of the World," ibid.; Charles Morton, Compendium physiceae,
Society of Massachusetts, 1946, 1687), 187; Antoine Le Grand, An Entire Body of Philosophy according to the Principles
of the Famous Renate Des Cartes, trans. Richard Blome (London: Samuel Roycroft, 1694), 283; and Locke, Essay,
II.i.23, II.iii.1.

17 "The Mind" no. 67, WJE 6:384; similarly, Religious Affections, WJE 2:205; "Miscellanies" no. 94, WJE
1:183; Locke, Essay, II.i.3, II.iii.4, IV.i.2; Le Clerc, Logica, 324; and Berkeley, Principles, § 4.

18 "Miscellanies" no. 94, WJE 13:258-60; similarly, no. 151 (141), p. 302; cf. no. 447, p. 495; "Miscellanies" no.
1253, WJE 23:185; "Discourse on the Trinity," WJE 21:117; 120; WJE 14:143; Descartes, Meditationes 37; Arnauld
and Nicole, Logic, I.i; Brattle, Logick, 265; J. O. Ursmson, Berkeley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982),
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19 Locke, Essay, II.i.3, II.xii.17.

20 WJE 16: 407, and "Miscellanies" no. 587, WJE 18:122, respectively; similarly, "Miscellanies" no. 782,
WJE 18:434; Freedom of Will, WJE 1:152, 316; "The Mind" no. 18, WJE 6:345, 393; cf. Arnauld and Nicole, Logic,
I.i.


Edwards is faithful to the Latin distich he had memorized: *Mens, mensura, quies, motus, positura, figura / Sunt cum materia, cunctarum exordia rerum.* On this Brattle comments that Cartesians are persuaded that the whole of nature is contained under these 7 classes: by *mens* they understand a thinking substance, by *materia*, an extended substance: - by *mensura*, magnitude: - by *positura*, the site or disposition of parts among themselves: by *figura, motus*, et *quies*, that which is usually understood thereby.

Of these “classes” only *mens* or “thinking substance” remains for Edwards. This doctrine of categories is of course also incompatible with the alleged influence of Franco Burgersdijk. From all this it is clear that Edwards endorsed the view that we immediately perceive nothing but ideas in the mind, that our words signify ideas and that we can account for perception in exclusively mechanical terms.

In moral philosophy, Edwards’ training and teaching were likewise based on established texts. Edwards began with Henry More’s *Enchiridion ethicum* (or one of the widely distributed tutorial summaries of it), which had been textbook at Harvard since the 1680s (English translation *An Account of Virtue* in 1690). More writes: “I will ever follow closely his [Descartes’s] footsteps, unless hindered by some major reason.” Edwards continued on his own with Cumberland, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume and Turnbull. Cartesians developed ethics as an outgrowth of the irreducibility of the thinking mind to the mechanical operations of extended bodies. For bodily motions are transmitted by the nerves to the brain and thereby give rise to passions in the mind. Thus “it is not the body, but the mind only, that is the proper seat of the affections.” To Edwards and his likeminded, the mechanistic physiology required a new account of mastering the passions in which a notion of virtue became crucial: “virtue in its most essential nature, consists in benevolent affection

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63 For instance, in Arnauld and Nicole, *Logic*, I.3.
64 Brattle, *Logick*, 270.

or propensity of heart towards Being in general? Accordingly all Edwards’ treatises on affections, will and virtue belong to the mid eighteenth century discussion of the relation between passions, sentiments, feelings or emotions on the one hand and reason on the other. His ethics course thus reinforced a view of the immediate access to the mind and (at least) prepared the way for a dualist anthropology.

Moreover, Edwards studied and taught nature through standard works in the mechanistic physics that Descartes invented. He may have begun with Morton’s Compendium physicae, which was extracted from Descartes, Hereboord, Rohault and Boyle, and was assigned well into the 1730s at Yale. (The notebook he inherited from his father also contained William Ames Technometria (a synopsis of Peter Ramus’s physics) and some theses taken from Henry Guterleth Physicae). He continued with Pemberton’s A View of Sir Isaac Newton’s Philosophy and “physico-theological” writings (or tutorial extracts). As tutor Edwards seems also to have studied such works as John Ray Three Physico-Theological Discourses and Isaac Watts’s First Principles of Astronomy and Geography. Standard works by Rohault, LeClerc and LeGrand must also have been available, and the metaphysics textbook of Henry More contained much physics and had a profound influence on Newton and Edwards. The importance of the mathematic-experimental ideal of natural science in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is hard to overestimate, and its popularity arose out of the rediscovery of the atomistic conjectures of Democritus, the powerful application of mathematics to matter, the renewed and rapid development of mechanics, and

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71 Nature of True Virtue, WJE 8:557.
72 For a very good account of this, see Fiering, Edwards’s Moral Thought.
73 On the syllabus in natural philosophy at Yale and Harvard, see surveys in Warch, School of the Prophets, 208-18, and Morison, The Tercentennial History of Harvard College and University, 1636-1936, I:223-71, respectively. For two succinct passages of the mechanistic system of natural science, see Descartes, Principia philosophia, Òuvres vol. VIIIA (1644; Paris: Vrin, 1982), II:64, pp.78-79; and Objectiones septimae in meditationes de prima philosophia, Òuvres vol. 7 (1642; Paris: Vrin, 1983), 442.
74 Warch, School of the Prophets, 217. Morton’s compendium was assigned well into the 1730s at Harvard; Morrison, The Tercentennial History of Harvard College and University, 1636-1936, 238.
the graphic illustration of the universe as a machine or a game of billiards.\textsuperscript{79} Edwards firmly adhered to this view of nature:

All bodies whatsoever, except atoms themselves, must of absolute necessity be composed of atoms, or of bodies that are indiscernible, that cannot be made less, or whose parts cannot by any finite power whatsoever, be separated one from another.\textsuperscript{80}

He believed that Newton’s “laws of motion and gravitation hold universally.”\textsuperscript{81} Consistent with mathematics, matter is conceived as extension in motion, where “extension” means that which has such geometrical qualities as shape, size and divisibility, and “motion” means the local change of a quantity. As a consequence, this programme treated those qualities that can be described in kinematic or geometric terms as “real” and those that can be described in sensuous terms as “appearances.” Since the former qualities can enter into scientific explanations, they are “primary,” and while the latter qualities cannot enter into such explanations, they are “secondary”. Matter can then, according to Edwards, be said to have the “essential and primary qualities” of solidity, gravity and mobility,\textsuperscript{82} whereas sounds, colours and pains are not qualities of things but of minds.\textsuperscript{83} This mechanistic notion of nature established for him that the world of perception must differ from the world of physics.

Last, in metaphysics Edwards studied and taught in the Cartesian tradition with a focus on natural theology and human psychology. According to Morton, “Metaphisicks, [is] a science of all beings as such.”\textsuperscript{84} There are though no records of textbooks in metaphysics, so the students probably relied on the rector’s lectures, chiefly a combination of natural theology and philosophy of mind.\textsuperscript{85} Edwards’ studies may have been guided by summaries of


\textsuperscript{80} “Of Atoms,” \textit{WJE} 6:208; on his general atomism, \textit{Freedom of Will, WJE} 1:387-93. The word “indiscernible” Henry More used for “indivisible.”


\textsuperscript{82} “Things to be Considered,” \textit{WJE} 6:290. In “Of Atoms,” the primary qualities seems to be space, figure and mobility (\textit{WJE} 6:212). In “The Mind,” he conflates “quality” and “property” and uses “primary property” of “matter” in the context of “solidity, mobility and gravitation”; more fully in no. 21(a), \textit{WJE} 6:347. In this context, “solidity” is used interchangeably with “solid extension.” On gravity, see “Things to be Considerd,” \textit{WJE} 6:234. In some of his formulations, Edwards seems to prefer Locke’s and Newton’s account of body as solidity rather than Descartes’s one of body as extension; see, for instance, “Of Atoms,” \textit{WJE} 6:211.


\textsuperscript{84} Morton, \textit{Logick}, 143.

\textsuperscript{85} Warch, \textit{School of the Prophets}, 223, 225.
More’s *Enchiridion metaphysicum* and John Le Clerc’s *Logica, ontologia et pneumatologia*. Although LeClerc’s as well as Heereboord’s metaphysics were very popular, I have not found evidence in favor of Edwards’ direct use of them. Anderson suggests that the instruction was based on Henry More, but in view of Edwards’ writings it is clear that he did not adopt the distinctives of More’s *Enchiridion metaphysicum* and seems rather to have been influenced by the more common Cartesian metaphysics. Fundamental to this system is the exclusive and exhaustive division of being into minds as thinking substances and bodies as extension in motion: “An INTELLECTUAL substance is a thinking substance; or a thing where in Immediately there is cogitation . . . . A MATERIALL substance or a body is a substance extended into length, weadth & profundity.” Edwards’ later study of Locke’s *Essay* and Malebranche’s *Search after Truth* would of course also have buttressed substance dualism (with the properties and modes of substances). Unperceivable substances exist independently and sensible properties depend on the existence of the substance they modify. Sensations, ideas, volitions and passions modify mind, while size, shape, motion and rest modify matter. Yet here Edwards departed from the general framework:

> those beings which have knowledge and consciousness are the only proper and real and substantial beings, inasmuch as the being of other things is only by these. From hence we may see the gross mistake of those who think material things the most substantial beings, and spirits more like a shadow; whereas spirits only are properly substance.

Thus Edwards revises the dualism of mind and matter in his sources to a monism of minds as “the only proper and real and substantial beings.” Elsewhere Edwards articulates his developed idealism as a revision of the exhaustive Cartesian distinction between

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“substance” and “property,”93 Opposite to the view that spirits are “more like a shadow” of material things, he repeatedly defends the view that “nothing else has a proper being but spirits, and [. . .] bodies are but shadows.”94 Just as bodies are “vulgarly” supposed to cast shadows and thus shadows depend on bodies, so “metaphysically” bodies are the shadows that minds cast and thus bodies depend on minds. This is how material things are “by these” spiritual things. Edwards spells out this dependence more thoroughly:

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.95

Without a mind having an idea of a body or the material universe, they cannot exist. Their existence does not only depend on but consist in the conception of a mind. Thus “all existence is perception.” He continues:

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.96

The view that a body is a mode of a perceiving mind and that a mind is a composite series of perceptions, raises of course the problem of how a body or the material universe can exist without a human conceiving them. It is here that God enters into the metaphysics of Edwards. For “the universal system, or sum total of existence,” is divided into “all intelligent existence, created, and uncreated.”97

Natural theology was not only important in itself for Cartesianism generally but was also its very foundation. “In the conception of God, as in so much of early modern philosophy, Descartes is the seminal figure.”98 Le Grand places natural theology before all other parts of philosophy (following logic) in his Body of Philosophy. Natural theology “is required to the laying of the Foundations of Human Disciplines, and in that without the knowledge of God, no solid Knowledge can be had of any thing whatsoever.”99 According to

95 “The Mind” no. 51, WJE 6:368.
96 “Notes on Knowledge and Existence,” WJE 6:398.
99 Le Grand, Philosophy, 54, depending on Descartes, Meditationes.
Edwards: “all being [. . .] is, in strictness, only a shadow of his.”

Every finite being not only depend on but consist in God, having an idea of it. In an early statement of this general account of being, Edwards sets out that things really are God’s ideas:

I will form my reasoning thus: if nothing has any existence any way at all but in some consciousness or idea or other, and therefore those things that are in no created consciousness have no existence but in the divine idea – as supposing the things in this room were in the idea of none but of God, they would have existence no other way, as we have shown in our Natural Philosophy; and if the things in this room would nevertheless be real things - then God’s idea, being a perfect idea, is really the thing itself.

Clearly nothing exists, according to Edwards, but in some consciousness, and the furniture in the room as well as the material universe exist as the ideas of God. This not only aims to account for the existence of things that are not the objects of a human mind, but also to make it possible for ideas to be the only objects of human minds:

Seeing our organs themselves are ideas, the connection that our ideas have with such and such a mode of our organs is no other than God’s constitution that some of our ideas shall be connected with others according to such a settled law and order, so that some ideas shall follow from others as their cause.

For instance, the organ of sight by which human minds seem to see ideas is itself a divine idea as is the human mind and its ideas. Although God was generally conceived by Cartesians as the supreme spiritual substance and Edwards uses such typical designations as “the uncreated consciousness” and “the infinite mind,” for him this meant that “speaking most strictly, there is no proper substance but God himself.” By “substance” Edwards means “a complexion of such ideas which we conceive of as subsisting together and by themselves,” and therefore he sets out his idea of God more fully in Lockean terms: “The notion of God, or idea I have of him, is that complex idea of such power, holiness, purity, majesty, love, excellency, beauty, loveliness, and ten thousand other things.”

A complex idea is composed of simple and more basic ideas, and by combining the latter humans can arrive at the former as, for instance, an idea of God. However, “there is no such
distinction in God of substance and property [since] this is opposite to the simplicity of God’s nature.”

So, Edwards received and conveyed instruction in logic, ethics, physics and metaphysics within a broadly Cartesian framework, and this framework is reflected in his writings.

Towards a Solution

Edwards’ formative years culminated in his attempt to write a systematic treatise of what is real and in particular to develop an account of idealism as basis for natural theology. The sources of this have however been regarded as the “perennially intriguing problem in American intellectual history.”

Yet, with the background of studies, teaching and research that Edwards did at Yale, his idealism should not be a perennially intriguing problem. For Cartesian dualism was arrived at by the methodical doubt that made it possible to doubt “the existence of the external world” including one’s body. If one can doubt the existence of one’s body, then one can doubt that there is anything else than minds with their ideas. Following Descartes there was a sustained debate among philosophers “whether material things exist” and not only minds. Among those that questioned his affirmative argument was Pierre Bayle, who denied the validity of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Although Edwards had no taste for Bayle’s general scepticism, he pursued his Dictionary eagerly and likewise argued that primary and secondary qualities are equally mind-dependent. Among other authors Edwards perused, Malebranche dismissed Descarte’s proof for the existence of material things, and although Locke seems impatient with the question of whether there is an “external world,” he still maintained that knowledge of the existence of anything else than oneself and God “extends not beyond the Objects present to our senses.”

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108 WJE 42. Sermon on Deut. 32:4.
111 Edwards had access to the first English edition of Bayle’s Dictionary from 1710 in the Dummer Collection and he desired to obtain it in 1724 as well the second edition in 1738: “Catalogue” nos. 234, 414, WJE 26:165, 213. Both entries are crossed out as if obtained, but whether he studied these passages we do not know.
112 Malebranche, Search after Truth, VI.vi.
113 Essay, IV.iii.21; cf. IV.xi.9-11.
not know whether these passages of Locke, Malebranche and Bayle had any influence on Edwards, but we have in this paper seen that he eagerly studied within this tradition. Several scholars have shown how many thinkers both on the Continent and the British Isles were gradually led to doubt or deny Descartes’s proof that bodies exist and affirm that only minds exist. To Edwards and his likeminded, idealism seemed obviously to follow from it. For starting from the commonly acknowledged premise at the time that only minds and their ideas are immediately and indubitably accessible whereas matter is not, Edwards found a basis for an ontological distinction between “two worlds, the external, the subject of natural philosophy; the internal, our own minds.” For the distinction between the directly accessible mind and the indirectly accessible matter, together with the distinction between primary and secondary qualities of matter, was generally supposed to establish that mind and body are two distinct substances. To this ontological dualism answer an epistemological one:

the body and the senses obscure the views of the mind. The world seems so differently to our eyes, to our ears and other senses, from the idea we have of it by reason, that we can hardly realize the latter.

In his arguments for idealism Edwards eliminates bodies by his account of perception and denial of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Thus he infers a technical distinction between the “vulgar” and the “rational account” of the world. On the one hand, there is “the material world [...] existent [...] as is vulgarly thought.” On the other hand, the “rational account” teaches that “the world, i.e., the material universe, exists nowhere but in the mind [...] the world [is] only mental [...]. [T]he existence of the whole material universe is absolutely dependent on idea.” Hence how the world seems to the senses is superficial, deceptive, or illusionary, whereas how the world is to reason is...
profound, genuine and true. Edwards allows, though, ordinary talk of the world: “yet we may speak in the old way,” namely, in the mechanistic way of “atoms” and their primary qualities of “bulk and figure” and “motion.” However, this is just the vulgar conception of the world. In this way the doctrine of the direct perception of mind with its ideas and the indirect perception of matter is the basis for the dualism between mind and matter and the necessary condition of the distinction between the vulgar and the rational account of the world. From these idealism may seem easily to follow. Since ideas are not material and not inaccessible, they can be viewed as constituting the world as it really is.

Thus it is not necessary to identify the exact sources and specific passages beyond his general framework to account for Edwards’ evolution of idealism; it would indeed be unhistorical to assume that one or two sources influenced him. Rather “nourished on an early diet of Cartesian rationalism” an independent thinker such as Edwards could clearly develop a version of idealism from his own studies, teaching and research. In a different context, Jasper Reid has similarly suggested that the common source of Edwards and Malebranche is “a Cartesian [...] adulterated Augustinianism,” Common sources rather than dependence would seem to be the case in Edwards, Berkeley, Collier, Norris, Leibniz and others as they all worked within the same framework of the modern turn to the subject. Most students at Yale probably remained within standard Cartesianism, while such as Edwards and Samuel Johnson moved on to idealism.

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122 “The Mind” no. 34, WJE 6:353-54. When Edwards writes, “we may speak in the old way,” Sang Hyun Lee misinterprets this as “Edwards is here speaking about the pre-Adamic-world” (The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards, 61). From the context it is obvious that Edwards writes about mechanistic discourse.


125 On Samuel Johnson’s idealism, see Berkeley, “Philosophical Correspondence between Berkeley and Samuel Johnson,” II.271-294; Johnson, Elementa philosophica, 321-29; and Ryder, “Cadwallader Colden, Samuel Johnson, and the Activity of Matter: Materialism and Idealism in Colonial America.”