The 18th-century American philosopher Jonathan Edwards gives the following argument in his early notebook writings, the Miscellanies:

It is no more unreasonable that we should be guilty of Adam’s first sin, than that we should be guilty of our own that we have been guilty of in times past. For we are not the same we were in times past, any other way than only as we please to call ourselves the same. For we are anew created every moment; and that that is caused to be this moment, is not the same that was caused to be the last moment, only as there is such a relation between this existence now and a certain existence in time past as we call sameness (Misc. 18, 13.210).¹

Much later, in Original Sin, Edwards offers a more detailed version with an extra step at the beginning:

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 ... no cause can produce effects in a time and place in 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;

¹. All quotations from Edwards are from The Works of Jonathan Edwards, cited by volume and page number. Everything from Volume 3 is from Original Sin. For other volumes, I give the work and (where applicable) section title.
and does no more coexist with it, than does any other moment that had ceased twenty years ago ... 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 ever 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 ever 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. ...

...[L]et us see how the consequence of these things is to my present purpose. 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 (3.400–402).

Edwards wrote *Original Sin* to combat the deflationary accounts of original sin then fashionable in his native New England. He wanted to defend the traditional claim that God holds each of us responsible for Adam’s sins. In the course of this defense, he considers the objection that imputing Adam’s sin to us “is altogether improper, as it implies falsehood; viewing and treating those as one, which indeed are not one, but entirely distinct” (3.395). Edwards replies that the objection is founded on a false hypothesis, and wrong notion of what we call sameness or oneness, among created things; and the seeming force of the objection arises from ignorance or inconsideration of the degree, in which created identity or oneness with past existence, in general, depends on the sovereign constitution and law of the Supreme Author and Disposer of the universe (3.397).

Elsewhere he describes “oneness” as depending on an “arbitrary constitution”. I am one with the person sitting here five minutes ago, and hence responsible for what she did, only because God arbitrarily constituted me as one with her.

Edwards assumes that his readers will not be willing to give up on moral responsibility altogether. Hence they should grant that arbitrary constitution can ground moral responsibility. And hence they should grant that God can make me responsible for Adam’s sin. Once this is granted, Edwards thinks, Scripture will do the rest.

II

The notion of arbitrary constitution raises a number of questions. But my concern is with something prior — Edwards’s argument that “what exists at this moment ... is ... simply and absolutely considered, not the same with any past existence” (3.402). Here’s how I read the argument:

1. The “present existence” of something like the moon “must have some cause”.

2. He also considers the objection “that such a constitution is injurious to Adam’s posterity”, responding that although things have in fact turned out badly for us, God has done us no injury; if Adam had not sinned, we would all have benefitted from being made one with him (3.395). The details and merits of this reply need not concern us.
2. The cause is either its “antecedent existence” or “the power of the Creator”.

3. But “no cause can produce effects in a time and place in which itself is not”.

4. And “the moon’s past existence was neither where nor when its present existence is”.

5. So, the cause of the moon’s present existence must be “the power of the Creator”.

6. So, “what exists at this moment, by this power, is a new effect; and simply and absolutely considered, not the same with any past existence”.

In other words: nothing endures.

Edwards justifies premise (1) by saying that the moon’s existence is “dependent”. But he doesn’t need this. He subscribes to a version of the principle of sufficient reason, according to which everything that exists must have a cause of its existence.3

Premise (2) is trivial, in Edwards’s context, given that “[the] moon’s antecedent existence” can be understood in various ways. If you think that God exists — as Edwards and all the readers he envisaged did — then he’s a possible cause of almost anything.4 And what third option is there?

The inference from (1)—(4) to (5) is unobjectionable. But the inference from (5) to (6) is puzzling. Premise (5) is a version of something widely accepted by early modern philosophers: that God must continually conserve the world in existence by an act that is in some sense equivalent to the act of creation. The phrase ‘in some sense’ is crucial. If you think that creation and conservation are equivalent just in the sense that they require the same power, then (6) doesn’t follow from (5). But Edwards holds that the acts of creation and conservation are equivalent in the sense that their intrinsic properties are the same:

God’s upholding created substance, or causing its existence in each successive moment, is altogether equivalent to an immediate production out of nothing, at each moment. ... [In conservation] God produces the effect as much from nothing, as if there had been nothing before. So that this effect differs not at all from the first creation, but only circumstantially; as in first creation there had been no such act and effect of God’s power before; whereas, his giving existence afterwards, follows preceding acts and effects of the same kind, in an established order (3.402).

This seems to be the same sense in which Descartes, for instance, accepts continual creation:

[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 (Third Meditation; AT 7.48–49/CSM 2.33; bold mine).

3. See Misc. 91: “’Tis acknowledged by all to be self-evident, that nothing can begin to be without a cause” (13.254). A being that is necessary by its own nature, like God, can be the cause of its own existence: “’Tis absurd to suppose that anything is and there is absolutely no reason why it is. ... There is a reason to be given why God should have a being. The reason is because there is no other way. There is nothing else supposable to be put with the being of God as the other part of the disjunction” (Misc. 880, 20.122). Edwards holds that the principle of sufficient reason is self-evident and indemonstrable: “Neither can we prove it, any other way than by explaining of it: when understood, ‘tis a truth that irresistibly will have place in the assent. Thus, if we suppose a time wherein there was nothing at all, it is self-evident that a body could not of its own accord begin to be: ’tis what the understanding abhors, that it should be, when there was no manner of reason why it was” (Misc. 91; 13.254–255).

4. Almost anything, since many of Edwards’s readers (although not Edwards himself) would deny that God can cause human free acts.
But Descartes would not have accepted (6).

Why does Edwards infer (6) from (5) when others do not? Maybe (5) really does imply (6), and Descartes just missed it. But more likely, the inference depends on an implicit premise that Edwards accepts and Descartes rejects. I'll come back to this missing premise, which concerns individuation, in section VII.

Premises (3) and (4) are also puzzling. Premise (4) says that the moon’s past existence is not where or when its present existence is. But what sort of thing is the moon’s past existence? You might think this sounds like a state of affairs. But, like almost all of his contemporaries, Edwards thinks that the appropriate relata for the causal relation are things (rather than powers, for instance).\(^5\)

This might seem like a problem. If by “the moon’s past existence”, Edwards means “the moon that existed in the past”, then the argument seems to beg the question. Anyone who holds that things endure would say that the moon that existed in the past is the very same thing that exists now, hence denying premise (4), understood as the claim that the moon that existed in the past was neither where nor when the moon that exists in the present is.

However, in Edwards’s tradition, things typically act as causes by doing something — by, for instance, exerting their causal power. So perhaps we should read Edwards as claiming that the moon that exists at t1 cannot cause anything at t2 by exerting its causal power at t1. This avoids begging the question against the opponent who thinks that the same moon exists at t1 and t2.

Premise (3) is a version of the principle I’ll call no action at a distance — a principle that Edwards sometimes, though not always, expresses in terms of the exertion of power:

\[^5\] At Freedom of the Will 2.1, for instance, Edwards discusses “the great impropriety of such phrases, and ways of speaking, as ‘the will’s determining itself’” because actions are to be ascribed to agents, and not properly to the powers of agents; which improper way of speaking leads to many mistakes, and much confusion, as Mr. Locke observes” (1.171–172).

Jonathan Edwards’s Argument Concerning Persistence

[N]othing can exert itself, or operate, when and where it is not existing (3.400).

The existences (so to speak) of an effect … in different parts of space or duration, though ever so near one to another, don’t at all coexist one with other … 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 (3.401).

I take the name no action at a distance from early modern disputes about Newtonian gravitation, but Edwards’s principle is much stronger than the one his contemporaries typically had in mind. It applies to time as well as space, and it’s not just the Humean claim that cause and effect must be contiguous.\(^6\) Contiguity isn’t enough for Edwards: if cause and effect are both in space and time, they must be in the same place at the same time.

III

Edwards does not give much in the way of argument for no action at a distance. It doesn’t rely on his views about the structure of space and time, because he doesn’t have a developed view about the structure of space and time.\(^7\) Indeed, Edwards often writes as if no action at a distance is simply obvious. But why think this?

\[^6\] See, e.g., Treatise 1.3.13.

\[^7\] He does make a few remarks in passing: at Freedom of the Will 4.8 he says that “we must suppose matter [and hence space] to be infinitely divisible” (1.385–386), and in Original Sin 4.3 he casually refers to “the next moment” (3.401) and “the preceding moment” (3.402).
The spatial half of the principle turns out to be trivial. Edwards is an immaterialist. But like his fellow immaterialist Berkeley, he is happy to speak with the vulgar:

Though we suppose that the existence of the whole material universe is absolutely dependent on idea, yet we may speak in the old way, and as properly and truly as ever (The Mind 34; 6.353).

Thus, he needs a way to analyze talk about spatial location. This is straightforward in the case of spirits. To say that spirit $x$ is in the same place as some $y$ is simply to say that $x$ acts on $y$: “a spirit can’t be said to be in place at all [but] only with respect to the immediate mutual operation there is between that and body” (Misc. 264, 13.370; cf. The Mind 2, 6.339). Notice what this implies about God’s spatial location. God is omnipotent and thus can act on anything, anywhere in space. Moreover, given continual creation, God is acting everywhere, at all times. Thus, although God does not exist in space — space exists in him — he is virtually or operationally present throughout space.

We saw earlier that only things can be causes. And given immaterialism, spirits are the only things there are. Thus, if a spirit always is where it acts, it follows that cause and effect must always be in the same place. This is the spatial half of no action at a distance.

What about the temporal half? Although Edwards doesn’t give a full argument for it, he does give some hints. He says at one point that the cause of a present effect cannot be in the past, because the past does not exist:

8. Edwards’s arguments for immaterialism are strikingly similar to Berkeley’s, but the scholarly consensus is that he arrived at immaterialism independently. See 6.215, 341, 344, 350–351, 385, and 398 for various statements of immaterialism and arguments for it.

9. It’s useful to think of God’s ability to act anywhere in time as a matter of virtual or operational presence as well, although, on Edwards’s view, time has a reality that space lacks.

Jonathan Edwards’s Argument Concerning Persistence

The mere exertion of a new thought is a certain proof of a God. For … here is a new thing, and there is a necessity of a cause. It is not antecedent thoughts, for they are vanished and gone; they are past, and what is past is not (Misc. 267; 13.373).

’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 no more does coexist with it, than does any other moment that had ceased to be twenty years ago (3.400).

But this doesn’t really help. If Edwards means that past things can’t cause anything in the present because they no longer exist, then, as we saw in connection with premise (4), this seems to beg the question against any opponent who thinks things endure. And if he means that past exertions can’t cause anything in the present, then this isn’t an argument for no action at a distance, just a restatement of it.

You might think Edwards is relying on some version of presentism here. But although the two passages just quoted do suggest this, I don’t think we should ascribe presentism to him. There is little text to go on besides these two remarks, and presentism fits badly with his repeated claims that action at a temporal distance is unacceptable for exactly the same reason as action at a spatial distance.

Indeed, the alleged parity of space and time grounds Edwards’s second suggestion as to why we should accept no action at a distance. Like a number of his contemporaries, Edwards thinks that gravity must be the result of direct divine action. For if it weren’t, it would — unacceptably — involve action at a distance (The Mind 61; 6.378). But if action at a distance involves action at a temporal distance, then action at a spatial distance must be direct divine action. Thus, for Edwards, there is no action at a distance.

10. Edwards does not consider the possibility of an ether or some other mechanical explanation of gravitation here. Elsewhere, he suggests that “if there be any ethereal matter at all, however little, this is one part of the atmosphere”
tion at a spatial distance is unacceptable, action at a temporal distance should be unacceptable too:

‘Tis the same thing that distant existence as to place should have influence on bodies, as in gravity, as that existence distant as to time, being past, should have influence on its present existence, as in the successions of motion (Things to be Considerd an[d] Written fully about 61; 6.257).

And if there cannot be a large gap between cause and effect, there cannot be a small gap either:

[T]he 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 (3.401).

The point can be made more general. Consider the following five theses:11

(i) S can produce an effect even though it cannot exist.

(ii) S can produce an effect even though it doesn’t actually exist (but could exist).

(iii) S can produce an effect even though it doesn’t exist now (but will exist in the future).

(iv) S can produce an effect even though it doesn’t exist now (but did exist in the past).

(v) S can produce an effect even though it doesn’t exist here (but does exist elsewhere).

Virtually no early modern accepted (i), (ii), or (iii). Many early moderns rejected (v) as well. As a result, they either rejected Newtonian gravitation or (more often) sought to explain it in terms of some contact mechanism. For they thought that irreducible action at a distance was mysterious, a throwback to bad old Aristotelian ways of thinking.12 Edwards claims that (iv) is unacceptable for just the same reason as (i), (ii), (iii), and (v).

I think the parity argument has some appeal. But there are several problems with it, especially in Edwards’s hands.

The first problem is that it’s directed entirely at people who already reject (v). And Edwards says nothing to convince us that we should reject action at a spatial distance. Even given the historical context, this is worrying. For by the time Edwards was writing, many people had decided that because of the success of Newtonian physics, (iv) must be acceptable after all. This opens the door to a parity argument in the other direction: If action at a spatial distance is possible, indeed ubiquitous, why shouldn’t action at a temporal distance be possible or even ubiquitous too?

A second problem is that Edwards’s immaterialism undermines the parity argument. Time, for Edwards, is real; space is not. So why expect temporal distance and spatial distance to have the same effect? Granted, immaterialism is suppressed in Original Sin. (We’ll see a bit more about this in section VII.) So Edwards might reasonably expect the parity argument to convince his readers. But it cannot be what grounds his own acceptance of no action at a distance.

Finally, even if the parity argument works, it is not clear that it shows what Edwards needs it to. People who objected to action at a distance in the 18th century typically did so because of mechanist intuitions about causation: they thought that causation required contact.

12. Of course, many if not most scholastic thinkers rejected action at a distance too. For instance, in Metaphysical Disputations 18.8.10, Suárez attributes to Aristotle, Aquinas, and others a principle he himself also endorses: ‘that in the case of every efficient cause it is a necessary condition for its acting that it be next to and not distant from the thing that it primarily and immediately acts upon’.

11. I owe this formulation to Jasper Reid.
And if your notion of causation is the notion of what happens when one billiard ball hits another, you don’t think cause and effect must be in the same place at the same time. (Indeed, you probably think that two things can’t be in the same place at the same time.) You think that cause and effect must be contiguous. So, Edwards’s parity argument needs an extra step, to show that anyone who insists that cause and effect must be contiguous should really insist that cause and effect must be present in the same place or time.

It’s been suggested that no action at a distance is derived from the principle of sufficient reason. If the cause happens at t(x) and the effect at t(y), then there’s something for which no reason can be given, namely why the effect happens at t(y) rather than t(z).

There are historical antecedents for using PSR to show that an effect cannot occur after its cause. Consider some examples:

[I]f at any instant there is a cause with which the effect proceeds from it and cannot co-exist at that same instant, the only reason is that some element required for complete causality is missing (Aquinas 1964, De Aeternitate Mundi 5).

[I]n the instant the cause is entire, in that same instant the effect is also produced. For if it were not produced, something requisite to its production would be absent, and thus it would not be the entire cause, as was supposed (Hobbes, De Corpore 2.9.5).

However, Edwards cannot ground no action at a distance in the principle of sufficient reason, because there are two possible reasons he can’t rule out.

The first is that the effect occurs at t(y) rather than t(z) because the cause willed for the effect to occur at t(y) rather than t(z). This only


14. This must be possible, even if the act of will doesn’t occur at t(y), because God can will things to happen in time even though he exists outside of time.

works if the cause is a voluntary agent, but this is not a problem: again, given immaterialism, the only possible causes are spirits — voluntary agents — anyway.

The second is that the effect occurs at t(y) rather than t(z) because t(y) is the very next moment. This would yield something like Hume’s position:

[A]n object, which exists for any time in its full perfection without any effect, is not the sole cause of that effect, but requires to be assisted by some other principle, which may forward its influence and operation. For as like effects necessarily follow from like causes, and in a contiguous time and place, their separation for a moment shews, that these causes are not compleat ones (Hume, Treatise 1.3.15; cf. 1.3.2.7).

I am not sure that this is a better explanation than saying that the effect occurs precisely when the cause does, but it is not clearly a worse explanation either.

Hume argues that the effect occurs right after the cause — at the very next moment — on the grounds that if the effect occurred at the same moment as the cause then everything would happen at the same time:

[I]f any cause may be perfectly co-temporary with its effect, it is certain … that they must all of them be so; since any one of them, which retards its operation for a single moment, exerts not itself at that very individual time, in which it might have operated; and therefore is no proper cause. The consequence of this would be no less than the destruction of that succession of causes, which we

See Freedom of the Will 4.8: “The eternal duration which was before the world, being only the eternity of God’s existence … is nothing else but his immediate, perfect, and invariable possession of the whole of his unlimited life, together and at once … Which is so generally allowed, that I need not stand to demonstrate it” (4.8; 1.385-386).
observe in the world; and indeed, the utter annihilation of time. For if one cause were co-temporary with its effect, and this effect with its effect, and so on, it is plain there would be no such thing as succession, and all objects must be co-existent (Hume, Treatise 1.3.2.7).

This argument wouldn’t worry Edwards. Since he thinks that God is the only true cause, he can deny the possibility of temporal separation between cause and effect without collapsing time into a single moment. But because he grounds his occasionalism on no action at a distance and the associated doctrine of continual creation, he’d better not be assuming that God is the only cause here. Thus no action at a distance isn’t grounded in the principle of sufficient reason. Nor is it grounded in the non-existence of the past or in parity considerations. In fact, it seems to have no grounding at all: it must be accepted as self-evident.

**IV**

The conclusion of the argument we’ve been considering is that “what exists at this moment … is a new effect; and simply and absolutely considered, not the same with any past existence” (3.402). The conclusion, in other words, is that nothing endures.

Edwards’s predecessors and contemporaries simply assumed that things were wholly present at each moment of their existence and that they persisted through time by enduring. But some of his more recent readers have read him as challenging the latter assumption. For instance, Roderick Chisholm and Mark Johnston have attributed to Edwards the remarkable view that Johnston calls “identity voluntarism”:

> 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 … 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. Now the standard philosophical conception of the genidentity condition for bodies is something like the continuity of life condition, or perhaps some mix of the continuity of life condition with the material reassembly condition. But on the proposal at hand, these conditions are at best coextensive with the real genidentity condition for bodies, namely the condition that God wills that these body stages and only these body stages make up a body! (Johnston 2010, 123)

16. Cf. Chisholm 1976, 139: ‘God, according to Jonathan Edwards, can contemplate a collection of objects existing at different times and treat them as one’ … Edwards thus appeals to a doctrine of truth by divine convention; he says that God ‘makes truth, in affairs of this nature’. God could regard temporally scattered individuals — you this year, me last year, and the Vice-President the year before that — as comprising a single individual.

17. Helm 1979 offers a perdurantist interpretation of Edwards without the voluntarist component. Cf. Wainwright 2010, who argues, ‘Edwards’s remarks are ambiguous. Sometimes he speaks as if God decides what the criteria of identity for various things will be. … At other times Edwards seems only to be saying that God brings it about that things meet these criteria’ (203). I discuss the voluntarist interpretation elsewhere.

18. Rea 2007 also suggests this reading, along with one on which Edwards is a stage theorist — that is, on which Edwards thinks that ordinary objects exist only for an instant, so that there is no thing that is wholly or partially present at more than one instant, and also thinks there are some relations that bind various objects into wholes. If stage theory is thought of as the denial of...
reason to reject this reading. From the claim that “what exists at this moment ... is ... simply and absolutely considered, not the same with any past existence” (3.402), Edwards does not infer that things per-
dure. Rather, he infers that things do not persist.

One might object that only the perdurantist interpretation can make sense of Edwards’s claims about original sin. But that would be a mistake. On the perdurantist interpretation, I am responsible for what Adam did because we are both parts of the same persisting moral being. But what makes us parts of the same persisting moral being? According to Chisholm and Johnston, divine fiat. According to other versions of the perdurantist reading, the fact that I am descended from Adam. So on the perdurantist reading, my responsibility for Adam’s sin is grounded in sameness of persisting moral being, which in turn is grounded in either divine fiat or descent. I find this less than satisfying: it’s not obvious how descent could be sufficient for sameness, let alone how divine fiat could be.

On the “no persistence” interpretation, there is no sameness. My responsibility for Adam’s sin is grounded directly in either divine fiat or descent. This strikes me as no worse — though no better — than the grounding supplied by the perdurantist interpretation.

V

Someone who reads Edwards as a perdurantist might think of herself as explaining what he actually says about persistence. Or she might think of herself as explaining what he should say about persistence, given his other commitments. I’ll start with what Edwards actually says, and move on to what he should say in the following sections.

Edwards’s language in Original Sin is systematically ambiguous, in the following sense: Someone who comes to the text thinking of

19. Helm and Wainwright devote much more attention to what grounds sameness of persons than to what grounds my sameness with Adam. But I think they would say that descent is what does the work: Edwards really doesn’t mention any other relation I bear to Adam.

perdurantism as a live option can read the text accordingly, without doing violence to it. But someone who doesn’t come to the text with perdurantism in mind will read Edwards as denying that anything persists, rather than offering a new theory of what persistence consists in. I think this fact supports the “no persistence” interpretation. Edwards’s contemporaries wouldn’t have come to the text with perdurantism in mind, so if he wanted them to see it, he should — and would — have been a lot clearer. But I don’t want to place too much weight on this.

Here are some examples of the ambiguity: Edwards says that “there is no identity or oneness ... but what depends on the arbitrary constitution of the Creator”, which implies that there is identity; in the same sentence, he says that God “treats them as one ... and so, leads us to regard and treat them as one”, thereby implying that they aren’t really one (3.402–403). He refers to “created identity or oneness” but, earlier in the same sentence, says that he’s concerned with the notion of what we call *sameness or oneness* (3.397). He says that God “constitutes all ... created ... oneness”, but also that God establishes a constitution “whereby the natural posterity of Adam ... should be treated as one with him” (3.405). And so on. You can emphasize the references to created oneness and say that God treats things as one because they are one. Or you can emphasize the references to God treating things as one and say that created oneness is a sort of ersatz identity.

Moreover, Edwards contrasts “created identity or oneness” with genuine identity:

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 (3.400).

There is such a thing as absolute identity. God bears it to himself. But nothing else does. This fits the perdurantist interpretation badly.
Edwards’s examples of oneness relations again suggest that oneness isn’t identity. Several of them will sound familiar to anyone who—like Edwards himself—knows Locke’s account of identity:  

[A] tree, grown great, and an hundred years old, is one plant with the little sprout, that first came out of the ground, from whence it grew ... though it’s now ... of a very different form, and perhaps not one atom the very same: yet God, according to an established law of nature, has in a constant succession communicated to it many of the same qualities, and most important properties, as if it were one. It has been his pleasure, to constitute an union in these respects, and for these purposes, naturally leading us to look upon all as one (3.397–398).

The ambiguity recurs here. On one hand, the tree “is one plant” with the sprout. On the other hand, God gives it properties “as if it were one”, thereby “leading us to look upon all as one”. Consider another example:

[T]he 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 ... 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 (3.398).

The same ambiguity again: on one hand, the adult body and the infant body “are one”; on the other hand, they are “dealt with by [God] as one body” for certain purposes.

20. See Wallace E. Anderson’s Introduction to vol. 6 of the Yale Edwards for more on Edwards’s knowledge of Locke.

Jonathan Edwards’s Argument Concerning Persistence

The plant case and man case fit both the perdurantist interpretation and the “no persistence” interpretation. But two other examples of oneness relations cause trouble for the perdurantist interpretation:

[T]he 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 important 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 (3.398).

[T]he divine constitution concerning the manner of mankind’s coming into existence in their propagation, was such as did ... naturally unite them, and made ‘em in so many respects one, naturally leading them to a close union in society (3.407).

These examples should worry anyone who thinks that when Edwards is talking about oneness relations, he’s talking about the genidentity relations that bind temporal parts into persisting wholes. Different members of the human race bear both diachronic and synchronic relations to each other, and the oneness relation between mind and body isn’t diachronic at all. Thus, the notion of oneness is much broader than the perdurantist interpretation makes out.

Someone who defends the perdurantist interpretation might reply that this doesn’t matter. On her view, what Edwards’s oneness relations do is bind parts together into wholes. As long as Edwards thinks
that some of these wholes are composed of temporal parts, that’s enough. He need not think that having temporal parts is the only way to have parts.

However, perdurantism requires something beyond just thinking that there are wholes composed of parts that exist at different times. It requires thinking that what such parts compose are persisting beings of some sort — persisting persons, persisting organisms, and so on. This is the ingredient that is missing in Edwards.

VI
Edwards uses a number of different examples to illustrate the claim that “what exists at this moment … is … not the same with any past existence”: the brightness of the moon, the sound of the wind, the water flowing in a river, and so on. Here’s my favorite:

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 that exists at 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 between the object and the glass, the image immediately ceases, the past existence of the image has no influence to uphold it (3.403, n. 5).

The claim is not that we persist in the way mirror images persist. A mirror image is not the kind of thing that persists; it is not a thing in any strong sense at all. To compare a person or an oak tree to a mirror image is to say that they are less real, less substantial, than previously thought.21

This comparison isn’t just a passing remark. Rather, it derives from a way of thinking about the status of the created world that is central to Edwards’s whole project. Creatures, he argues, have “a dependent existence” (3.400), and

All dependent existence whatsoever is in a constant flux, ever passing and returning; renewed every moment, as the colors of bodies are every moment renewed by the light that shines upon them; and all is constantly proceeding from God, as light from the sun. “In him we live, and move, and have our being” (3.404).

Many early modern philosophers used this Biblical quotation, but Edwards intends it more literally than most. He is reluctant to allow creatures a full being of their own:

God — as he is infinite, and the being whence all are derived, and from whom every thing is given — does comprehend the entity of all his creatures; and their entity is not to be added to his, as not comprehended in it, for they are but communications from him. Communication of being ben’t additions of being. The reflection of the sun’s light don’t add at all to the sum total of the light (Misc. 697, 18.282).

But he is also reluctant to deny being to creatures altogether, since this would make it difficult to understand why God bothered to create the world in the first place:

21. Edwards’s view of the creation is often compared to a movie, in what is sometimes said to be an updated version of the analogy. But I think the “update” is misleading. Movies have a reality that mirror images lack; they are works of art, as well as patterns of light, and this affects our intuitions about their ontological status.
[T]here is an infinite fullness of all possible good in God .... And as this fullness is capable of communication or emanation ad extra, it seems a thing amiable and valuable in itself that it should be communicated or flow forth, that this infinite fountain of good should send forth abundant streams, that this infinite fountain of light should, diffusing its excellent fullness, pour forth light all around. And as this is in itself excellent, so a disposition to this in the Divine Being must be looked upon as a perfection or an excellent disposition; such an emanation of good is, in some sense, a multiplication of it; so far as the communication or external stream may be looked upon as anything besides the fountain, so far it may be looked upon as an increase of good (End of Creation 1.2, 8.432–433).

This language — the sun, the fountain, emanation, and so on — strikes many readers as neo-Platonist. Others argue that neo-Platonist readings of Edwards are misguided. But in any case, the notion of emanation was very widely diffused in early modern philosophy. Leibniz says that God “preserves ... and even produces [created substances] continually by a kind of emanation, just as we produce thoughts” (Discourse on Metaphysics 14; Leibniz 1989, 46). Newton claims that space is “as it were an emanative effect of God” (De gravitatione; Newton 2004, 21). Henry More explains the notion of emanative causation thus:

By an Emanative Cause is understood such a Cause as merely by Being, no other activity or causality interposed, produces an Effect ... (Book I, Chapter VI, Axiome XVI, The Immortality of the Soul).

An Emanative Effect is coexistent with the very Substance of that which is said to be the Cause thereof. This must needs be true, because that very Substance which is said to be the Cause, is the adequate and immediate Cause, and wants nothing to be adjoined to its bare essence for the production of the Effect; and therefore by the same reason the Effect is at any time, it must be at all times, or so long as that Substance does exist (Axiome XVII, ibid.).

Notions of emanation and emanative causation were also used by writers with no neo-Platonist sympathies at all. Suárez, for instance, says that “the intellect ... emanates proximately from the substance of the soul, and quantity emanates proximately from matter or form” (Metaphysical Disputations 18.3.3) and that “it is probable that the substantial form has a certain power for having its proper accidents emanate from it” (MD 18.3.4). Emanative causation seems to be an atypical kind of efficient causation for Suárez. “Efficient causality consists in an action”, and emanation is an action (MD 18.3.5). But emanation lacks several of the features of standard efficient causation. The emanative effect occurs whenever its cause exists, and only then (MD 18.3.8). And while “real efficient causality exists ... among things themselves” and “necessarily requires a distinction in reality between the principal and the terminus” (MD 18.3.10), emanation “is wholly intrinsic” (MD 18.3.14).

---

22. See, e.g., Crisp 2012, 9: “In the final analysis, Edwards is nothing if not a Christian neo-Platonist. The world exists as a divine idea that God ‘emanates’ moment by moment. But no created thing has the power to persist through time. God creates the world out of nothing, whereupon it immediately ceases to exist, to be replaced by another world.”

23. In his editor’s introduction to End of Creation, Paul Ramsey, discussing this passage, explains:

The word emanation ... is in the context of ‘communication’ .... A crucial question is whether ‘communication’ governs the meaning of emanation, ‘flowing forth’, and the images of fountain and light that [Edwards] uses; or whether emanation governs the meaning of communication and those images. If the first, one’s reading ... will be more Biblical, communication expressing an action, disposition, or will in God. If the second, one’s reading will be more Neoplatonic, emanation meaning some sort of procession of or from God (8,433 n. 5).

Ramsey argues for the first reading. And Steve Daniel insists that “though he borrows much of Neoplatonism’s vocabulary of emanation and communication, Edwards cannot accept its implicit reduction of creation and its history to mere illusion” (Daniel 1994, 66).
These various notions of emanative causation differ in minor respects, but there’s a common core that explains why all the writers just mentioned use the term. Two elements of this common core are important here. First, an emanative effect exists whenever its cause exists, and only when its cause exists. And second, emanation is neither fully immanent nor fully transeunt. The emanative effect is not part of the cause, but it’s not a distinct thing in its own right either. The light and the stream are neither parts of the sun and the fountain, nor distinct entities on the same ontological level as them.

I don’t intend to draw any conclusions here about the precise ontological status of Edwards’s created world. It’s far easier to see what creation isn’t than what it is. My goal is simply to make clear that Edwards thinks of the created world as radically dependent on God — far more radically than the doctrine of continual creation demands. In the context of his tradition, Edwards’s metaphysics of the created world is revisionist in the extreme. A blanket denial of persistence would fit in with this very well.

VII
The notion of emanation is clearly important for understanding what Edwards says about persistence, but it’s hard to say anything very precise about it. So let me turn to something closely related but rather more tractable: his denial that creatures are substances.

Although this is one of Edwards’s fundamental metaphysical principles, it isn’t really apparent in Original Sin. In fact, that work gives a rather misleading picture of Edwards’s metaphysics. Someone who just read Original Sin would naturally assume that Edwards is committed to the existence of matter, created powers, and created substances. But elsewhere, Edwards explicitly disavows all three commitments.

This tactic makes sense, given Original Sin’s motivation — to convince his audience of the traditional doctrine of original sin. The readers he had in mind tended to be suspicious of metaphysics. Hence, he tried to convince them to accept a conservative Calvinist account of original sin using as little metaphysics as he thought he could get away with.

The denial of creaturely substantiality isn’t an attack on the traditional concept of substance. On Edwards’s view, the concept is legitimate. It simply applies far less broadly than previously thought:

God is as it were the only substance, or rather, the perfection and steadfastness of his knowledge, wisdom, power, and will (“Notes on Knowledge and Existence”; 3.698).

Contrary to the opinion of Hobbes (that nothing is substance but matter) … no matter is substance but only God, who is a spirit … (Misc. f, 1.3166).

24. See, e.g., Freedom of the Will, which is aimed at a similar audience. There Edwards says, in response to the objection that the Calvinist view of freedom ‘is metaphysical and abstruse’, that ‘for a man to go about to confute the arguments of his opponent, by telling him, his arguments are ‘metaphysical’ would be as weak as to tell him, his arguments could not be substantial, because they were written in French or Latin. The question is not, whether what is said be metaphysics, physics, logic, or mathematics, Latin, French, English, or Mohawk? But, whether the reasoning be good, and the arguments truly conclusive?’ (4.13; 1.424).

25. See, e.g., Freedom of the Will, which is aimed at a similar audience. There Edwards says, in response to the objection that the Calvinist view of freedom ‘is metaphysical and abstruse’, that ‘for a man to go about to confute the arguments of his opponent, by telling him, his arguments are ‘metaphysical’ would be as weak as to tell him, his arguments could not be substantial, because they were written in French or Latin. The question is not, whether what is said be metaphysics, physics, logic, or mathematics, Latin, French, English, or Mohawk? But, whether the reasoning be good, and the arguments truly conclusive?’ (4.13; 1.424).


27. However, at one point Edwards delineates a vulgar sense of the term ‘substance’ as well: ‘The distribution of the objects of our thoughts into substances and modes may be proper, if by substance we understand a complex 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’ (The Mind 25; 6.349–350). This, I think, is the way in which we should understand the references to created substances in Original Sin.

28. This is a very early remark, written at a time when Edwards had not yet clearly abandoned the substantiality of created minds. (The passage continues, ‘other spirits are more substantial than matter.’) I take it as evidence that Edwards uses the concept of substance, and not as evidence that he thinks only God is a substance.
[T]here is no such thing as material substance truly and properly distinct from all those that are called sensible qualities. ... Answer to that objection, that then we have no evidence of immaterial substance. Answer: True, for this is what is supposed, that 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 ... (‘Notes on Knowledge and Existence’; 6.398).

Thus Edwards is making a claim about the nature of the created world, not a claim about the legitimacy of the category of substance. The denial of created substance and the denial of persisting things are closely related. But they are not equivalent. Many people who reject the ontological category of substance still think that things persist through time. And even if you do think there are substances, you might still think that some things besides substances persist through time: the Great Depression, the Swedish nation, and so on.

What about the other way around? Could one accept the traditional concept of substance while denying that substances persist through time? This would be awkward; it’s built into the traditional concept not only that substances persist through time, despite change in their properties, but that they do so by enduring. The same substratum is wholly present at each moment of the substance’s existence. However, perhaps someone who accepts the other elements of the traditional concept of substance — who thinks, for instance, that there are things in which properties inhere and from which properties flow — but rejects persistence should count as accepting the existence of created substances.29

29. Certainly many philosophers — including Edwards himself — have thought of God as a substance, even though they deny that he persists through time, because they deny that he exists in time to begin with. However, this strikes me as very different from allowing something to be a substance that exists for only a moment.

Jonathan Edwards’s Argument Concerning Persistence

The way Edwards conceives of substance is apparent from his explanation of why we believe, falsely, that there are created substances:

The reason why it is so exceeding 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 (The Mind 61, “Substance”; 6.380).30

Thus, for Edwards substance is something like the featureless substratum sometimes attributed to Locke: something “altogether hid” that “produces” and “upholds” properties.

Notice how closely related the notions of being produced and being upheld — that is, of causally depending and inhering — are for Edwards. The equation of causal dependence and inherence is even clearer in a passage from the early “Of Atoms”:

[Solidity] results from the immediate exercise of the divine power, causing there to be indefinite resistance in that place where it is. Since ... body and solidity are the same ... it follows that all body is nothing but what immediately results from the exercise of divine power in such a particular manner ... [and] that the certain unknown substance, which philosophers used to think subsisted by itself, and stood underneath and kept up solidity and all other properties, which they used to say it was impossible

30. Cf. Misc. 267; 13.373, quoted in section 7 above.
for a man to have an idea of, is nothing at all distinct from solidity itself; or, if they must needs apply that word to something else that does really and properly subsist by itself and support all these properties, they must apply it to the divine Being or power itself. ... So that the substance of bodies at last becomes either nothing, or nothing but the Deity acting ... (6.215–216).

If substance does not support properties, then God — who causes properties — must. Here, Edwards is very close to equating causal dependence with inherence.

Earlier, I pointed out a puzzle: Why does Edwards infer that nothing endures from the doctrine of continual creation when Descartes, for instance, seems to accept the same version of the doctrine without drawing any such conclusion? I said then that the answer has something to do with individuation, and now we can see what that is. Edwards relies on an assumption that Descartes would deny, namely that things are individuated by their causal history. For someone who holds that properties inhere in their causes, this is a natural assumption to make.

I also pointed out a puzzle about why Edwards accepts no action at a distance. He seems to think of it as self-evident, although his contemporaries would have found it no more self-evident than we do. Edwards’s motivations are clearer now that we’ve seen that the cause of properties is also what properties inhere in: the substratum must be present when and where the properties it supports are. The difficult, temporal half of no action at a distance is a conceptual truth about emnative causation.

VIII

It’s traditionally been assumed that things like trees, pigs, and persons are paradigmatically real or fundamental beings and that they are substances. Given these assumptions, a philosopher who has reached the conclusion that trees, pigs, and persons are not substances has two options: She can conclude that the traditional concept of substance should be rejected because it fails to describe what we thought were its paradigm instances. Or she can conclude that trees, pigs, and persons are not as real or fundamental as we thought they were. Edwards is such a philosopher, and he takes the second option — in large part because of his motivations for doing metaphysics in the first place.

There’s a parallel with regard to persistence. It’s traditionally been assumed that things persist through time and that the way to persist is to endure. Given these assumptions, a philosopher who has reached the conclusion that trees, pigs, and persons do not endure has two options: She can reject the assumption that things persist by enduring, and posit some other way for trees, pigs, and persons to persist. Or she can decide that trees, pigs, and persons do not persist through time after all. Here too, I’ve argued, Edwards takes the second option, and for similar reasons.

There’s also a parallel with what Malebranche and Hume say about causation. Malebranche assumes that causation requires necessary connection and argues that there are no necessary connections in the created world. As a result, he infers that creatures cannot be causes — something that fits his theological framework very well. Hume agrees that there are no necessary connections — at least, no genuine or mind-independent ones — but is not willing to abandon the belief that creatures are causes. Thus, he concludes that causation does not require necessary connection.

Edwards has a great deal in common with both Malebranche and Hume,31 but his theological framework is far more like Malebranche’s. Hence we should not be surprised that he opts for the Malebranchean tactic over the Humean one: he keeps the traditional metaphysical framework and thus downgrades the status of the created world.32

31. See Reid 2006 for more on the first part of this.

32. I’d like to thank the following for their helpful comments: Oliver Crisp, Stewart Duncan, Mike Jacobides, Paul Lodge, Trenton Merricks, and Walter Ott, who read previous versions of this paper; audiences at the Hume Society, the Roger Woolhouse Memorial Conference, the University of Richmond, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and the Virginia Philosophical Association; and the students in my spring 2013 seminar on early modern causation.
Jonathan Edwards’s Argument Concerning Persistence

Bibliography


