

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Editor: DR. PAUL CARUS.

Associates: { E. C. HEGELER.
MARY CARUS.

VOL. XXII. (No. 12.) DECEMBER, 1908.

NO. 631.

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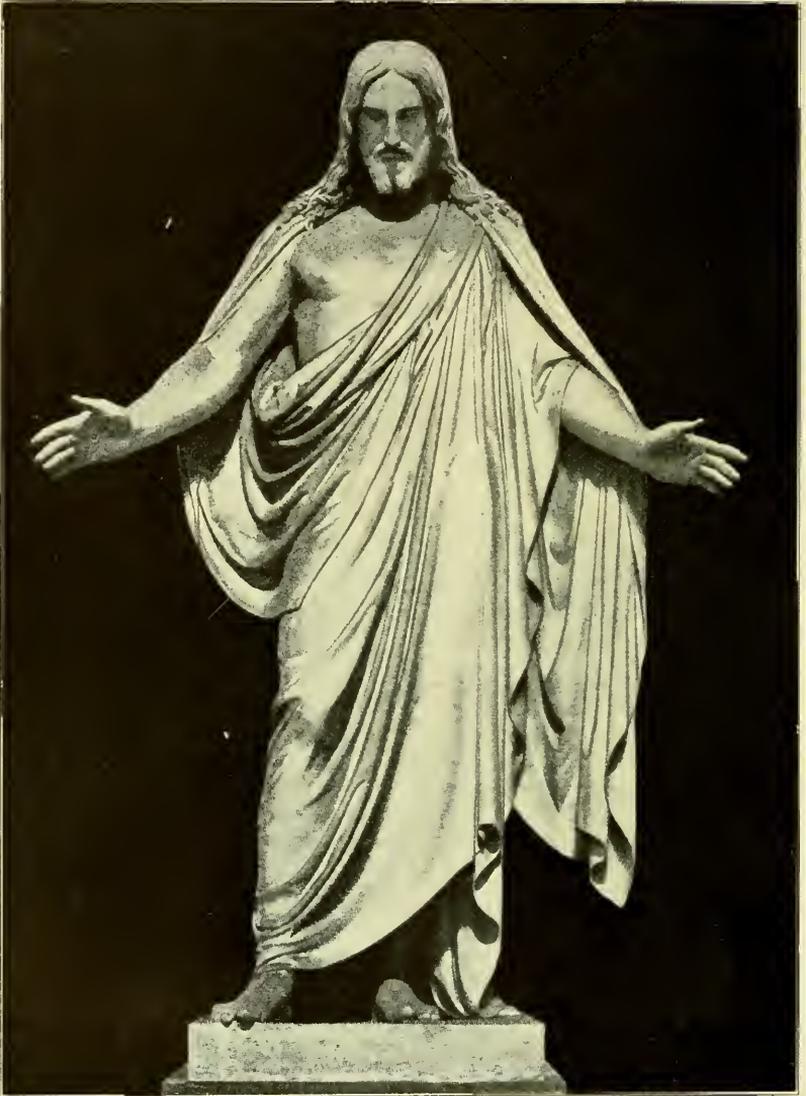
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THORWALDSEN'S STATUE OF CHRIST.

Frontispiece to The Open Court.

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THE REAL JONATHAN EDWARDS.

BY I. WOODBRIDGE RILEY, PH. D.

IN a variety of metaphors Jonathan Edwards has been presented as an exponent of an odious Puritanism, the very embodiment of the sulphurous side of Calvinism. The greatest of American divines has been called the fire-brand philosopher, the black-winged raven of the North, the relentless logician who left the print of his iron heel upon the New England conscience.

These figures present the truth, but not the whole of the truth. It is true that Edwards delivered the dreadful Enfield sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, and that he composed that pitiless treatise concerning *The Freedom of the Will* which belied its title, and doomed the bulk of mankind to the workings of an inexorable fate. But this is only one side of the picture. It is true that Edwards employed an unrelenting logic, it is also true that his powers of argumentation were equalled by his deep and strong and tender feeling. So while tradition has represented him as a sort of bloodless spectre, with pale, drawn face, recent scrutiny has found a mind more congruous with the beaming eye and sensitive mouth of his portrait. In a word, when freed from the dust of the past, the real Edwards shines out as a poet, a mystic and a philosopher of the feelings. Thus like another Dante he portrays her whom he loved as if she were another Beatrice, and like the author of the *Inferno*, he advances to a *Paradiso*, as when in one of his rhapsodies he says: "We have shown that the Son of God created the world for this very end—to communicate Himself an image of His own excellency. . . . When we behold the light and brightness of the sun, the golden edges of an evening cloud, or the beauteous bow, we behold the adumbrations of His glory and goodness; and in the blue sky, of His mildness and gentleness. There are also

many things wherein we may behold His awful majesty: in the sun in his strength, in comets, in thunder, with the lowering thunder-clouds, in ragged rocks and the brows of mountains."

The most notable fact in the early life of the Connecticut writer was his precocious possession of the powers both of imagination and of observation. Born in 1703, three years before Benjamin Franklin, and taught by his father, a graduate of Harvard, to read with pen in hand, Edwards while a student at Yale College, between the ages of fourteen and seventeen years started two notebooks entitled *Mind* and *Natural Science*. Of these the former has been declared to resemble the *Thoughts* of Pascal, the latter to approximate to the theories of Franklin. But even earlier than these remarkable undergraduate productions were two pre-collegiate papers written when their author was not more than twelve years old. The first of these was a little letter which, as a specimen both of wit and reasoning, in a child, Edwards's biographer says may fairly claim to be preserved. Written evidently to a boy older than himself the letter begins thus:

"I am informed you have advanced a notion, that the soul is material and attends the body till the resurrection; as I am a professed lover of novelty, you must imagine I am very much entertained by this discovery: (which however old in some parts of the world, is new to us;) but suffer my curiosity a little further. I would know the manner of the kingdom, before I swear allegiance. First, I would know whether this material soul keeps with [the body] in the coffin; and, if so, whether it might not be convenient to build a repository for it; in order to which, I would know what shape it is of, whether round, triangular, or four square; or whether it is a number of fine strings reaching from the head to the foot, and whether it does not lead a very discontented life. . . ."

About the same time as this bantering letter which was written, in all probability, in the year of the accession of George I, there came one more serious and on a different topic. Edwards's father had been writing to some foreign correspondent recounting certain interesting natural curiosities of the New World. To this correspondent the younger Edwards made bold to write the following epistle on the *Habits of the Flying Spider*:

"May it please your Honour. There are some things which I have happily seen of the wondrous ways of the working of the spider. . . . Everybody that is used to the country knows their marching in the air from one tree to another, sometimes at the distance of five or six rods. Nor can one go out in a dewy morning at the

latter end of August and the beginning of September, but he shall see multitudes of webs, made visible by the dew that hangs on them, reaching from one tree, branch and shrub to another. . . . But I have often seen that, which is much more astonishing. In very calm and serene days in the forementioned time of year, standing at some distance behind the end of an house or some other opaque body, so as just to hide the disk of the sun and keep off his dazzling rays, and looking along close by the side of it, I have seen a vast multitude of little shining webs, and glistening strings, brightly reflecting the sunbeams, and some of them of great length, and of such a height, that one would think they were tacked to the vault of the heavens, and would be burnt like tow in the sun, and make a very beautiful, pleasing, as well as surprising appearance. . . . But that which is most astonishing, is, that very often appear at the end of these webs, spiders sailing in the air with them; which I have often beheld with wonderment and pleasure, and showed to others. . . .”

Edwards as a naturalist discoursing on subjects from atoms to comets, from trees to ocean winds, presents a forgotten side of Puritan culture, that true love of nature exemplified by Cotton Mather when about this time he said: “The world’s various parts, curious ends, incomparable order are the sensible stamps of an universal power and wisdom and goodness.” Then too it is to be remembered that Edwards in his *Notes on Natural Science* was gathering materials for an intended work which he hoped would exhibit him as the eighteenth century ideal of a polymath, of a scholar of wide and varied learning. This was a truly sophomoric ambition, for the intellectual impulse to the scheme came in the student’s second year at college when, meeting with Locke’s *Essay on the Human Understanding*, he confesses to have read it with a far higher pleasure than the most greedy miser finds when gathering up handfuls of silver and gold from some newly discovered treasure. Yet even before he had fallen in with this stimulating work, the juvenile speculator had been at work on a little metaphysical essay of his own entitled *On Being*. A recent critical examination of the original manuscript, with its bad spelling, its absence of punctuation, has proved the authenticity of this document, which has been pronounced akin, if not identical with the idealism of the great Irish idealist, Bishop Berkeley. To prove that all existence is mental, that the material universe exists nowhere but in the mind, the youthful American argues as follows concerning the inconceivability of a state of nothingness, the infinity and divinity of space, and the spirituality of substance:

“That there should be absolutely nothing at all is utterly impossible, the Mind Can never Let it stretch its Conceptions ever so much bring it self to Concieve of a state of Perfect nothing, it put’s the mind into mere convulsion and Confusion to endeavour to think of such a state, and it Contradicts the very nature of the soul to think that it should be, and it is the Greatest Contradiction and the Aggregate of all Contradictions to say that there should not be, tis true we Cant so Distinctly show the Contradiction by words because we Cannot talk about it without Speaking horrid nonsense and Contradicting ourselfe at every word, and because nothing is that whereby we Distinctly show other particular Contradictions, but here we are Run up to Our first principle and have no other to explain the Nothingness or not being of nothing by, indeed we Can mean nothing else by nothing but a state of Absolute Contradiction; and If any man thinks that he Can think well Enough how there should be nothing I’ll Engage that what he means by nothing is as much something as any thing that ever He thought of in his Life, and I believe that if he knew what nothing was it would be intuitively Evident to him that it Could not be. . . .

“If a man would imagine space any where to be Divided So as there should be Nothing between the Divided parts, there Remains Space between notwithstanding and so the man Contradicts himself, and it is self evident I believe to every man that space is necessary, eternal, infinite & Omnipresent. but I had as Good speak Plain, I have already said as much as that Space is God, and it is indeed Clear to me, that all the space there is not proper to body, all the space there is without ye Bounds of the Creation, all the space there was before the Creation, is God himself, and no body would in the Least stick at it if it were not because of the Gross Conceptions that we have of space. . . .

“Let us suppose for illustration this impossibility that all the Spirits in the Universe to be for a time to be Deprived of their Consciousness, and Gods Consciousness at the same time to be intermitted. I say the Universe for that time would cease to be of it self and not only as we speak because the almighty Could not attend to Uphold the world but because God knew nothing of it. . . .

“Corollary. it follows from hence that 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.”

This essay *On Being*, which deals with the most abstruse and rarefied of subjects, is nevertheless relieved by certain poetic and imaginative passages, as when it is said that to think of nothing is to "think of the same that the sleeping rocks dream of," and "a state of nothing is a state wherein every proposition of Euclid is not true." But this is not the most astonishing of the productions of the undergraduate of the College of Connecticut, for two or three years later came those *Notes on the Mind* wherein the boy of sixteen or seventeen set forth a definition of immaterialism, which has been declared truly marvelous, even if it be held that at this time Edwards was a veritable Berkleian, and had actually borrowed from the good bishop, before the latter had come to the American strand. As a keynote to his deepest spiritual life, and as a hint to the earlier and perhaps independent origin of Edwards's idealism is this corollary to a note on space, its existence and infinity:

"And, indeed, the secret lies here: That, which truly is the Substance of all Bodies, is *the infinitely exact, and precise, and perfectly stable Idea, in God's mind, together with His stable Will, that the same shall gradually be communicated to us, and to other minds, according to certain fixed and exact established Methods and Laws; or in somewhat different language, the infinitely exact and precise Divine Idea, together with an answerable, perfectly exact, precise, and stable Will, with respect to correspondent communications to Created Minds, and effects on their minds.*"

Whence did the provincial undergraduate obtain this his conviction that the world is an ideal one? There is no positive proof to be adduced in favor of Edwards's acquaintance with the works of Berkeley at this time, for the most idealistic of the tutors of Yale College had not as yet fallen under the spell of the Irish idealism. But the question of historicity is not of such vital importance as that of personality. Even if we knew all the strands in the speculative web that would not explain the originality of the pattern. Hence the latest investigation has carried the problem back from external to internal sources, and has sought to attribute the origin of Edwards's philosophical immaterialism to his personal mysticism. It appears that it was his quietistic experiences which led him so early to a real belief in the unreality of the external world. Here without recurring to the ancient formulas, Edwards's conviction, that corporeal things can exist no other wise than mentally, may be explained in modern terms. Briefly put, the recognition of the unreal sense of things is due to a certain loss of the feeling of the compact

reality of the physical organism. In a word, to the mystic in his quietistic state, as the body seems less real, the spirit seems the more real.

How is this apparent abnormality to be defended? To the robust believer in the superior reality of material things, such an experience might appear a mere negation, a futile deduction from a state of blank unconsciousness. Not so to Edwards; to him as to the true mystic of every age there came the positive conviction that to the individual there is vouchsafed direct and intuitive knowledge of truth. But this does not arise without preparation, for there are three stages in the process: first, comes by great and violent inward struggles the gaining of a spirit to part with all things in the world; then, a kind of vision or certain fixed ideas and images of being alone in the mountains or some solitary wilderness far from all mankind; finally, a thought of being wrapt up in God in heaven, being, as it were, swallowed up in Him for ever. In these few words Edwards has summed up the mystic progression presented in the ancient manuals, those three stages in the ladder of perfection,—first, the purgative, brought about by contrition and amendment; then, the illuminative produced by concentration of all the faculties upon God; lastly, the intuitive or unitive wherein man beholds God face to face and is joined to Him in perfect union. In a passage of exquisite beauty, which may well be called a classic of the inner life, the saint of New England thus proceeds to unfold the record of his youthful ecstasy:

“After this my sense of divine things gradually increased, and became more and more lively, and had more of that inward sweetness. The appearance of everything was altered; there seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost everything. God’s excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in every thing; in the sun, moon, and stars; in the clouds, and the blue sky; in the grass, flowers, trees; in the water, and all nature; which used greatly to fix my mind. I often used to sit and view the moon for continuance; and in the day, spent much time viewing the clouds and sky, to behold the sweet glory of God in these things: in the mean time, singing forth, with a low voice, my contemplations of the Creator and Redeemer. And scarce any thing, among all the works of nature was so sweet to me as thunder and lightning; formerly, nothing had been so terrible to me. Before, I used to be uncommonly terrified with thunder and to be struck with terror when I saw a thunder-storm rising; but now, on the contrary, it rejoiced me. I felt God, so to speak, at the

first appearance of a thunderstorm ; and used to take the opportunity, at such times, to fix myself in order to view the clouds, and see the lightnings play, and hear the majestic and awful voice of God's thunder which oftentimes was exceedingly entertaining, leading me to sweet contemplations of my sweet and glorious God. While thus engaged, it always seemed natural to me to sing, or chant forth my meditations ; or, to speak my thoughts in soliloquies with a singing voice. Holiness, as I then wrote down some of my contemplations on it, appeared to me to be of a sweet, pleasant, charming, serene-calm nature ; which brought an inexpressible purity, brightness, peacefulness, and ravishment to the soul. In other words, that it made the soul like a field or garden of God, with all manner of pleasant flowers ; all pleasant, delightful, and undisturbed ; enjoying a sweet calm, and the gently vivifying beams of the sun. The soul of a true Christian, as I then wrote my meditations, appeared like such a little white flower as we see in the spring of the year ; low, and humble on the ground, opening its bosom, to receive the pleasant beams of the sun's glory ; rejoicing, as it were, in a calm rapture ; diffusing around a sweet fragrancy ; standing peacefully and lovingly, in the midst of other flowers round about ; all in like manner opening their bosoms, to drink in the light of the sun. There was no part of creature-holiness, that I had so great a sense of its loveliness as humility, brokenness of heart, and poverty of spirit ; and there was nothing that I so earnestly longed for. My heart panted after this,—to lie low before God, as in the dust ; that I might be nothing, and that God might be ALL."

Not far from the time of the experiences here portrayed, Edwards began his public career by supplying the pulpit of a small church in New York, whence he "used frequently to retire into a solitary place on the banks of the Hudson's River for contemplation on divine things." Returning to Yale College in 1723 to receive his master's degree, and retained as tutor for two years, he was married in New Haven to the beautiful Sarah Pierrepont whose house still stands on the green adjoining the College precincts.

In 1727 being settled as colleague-pastor with his grandfather, the Reverend Solomon Stoddard, in the town of Northampton, and in 1729 succeeding to the full pastorate, Edwards during the next fifteen years composed such works as his sermons on *Man's Dependence* and on *Justification* and such treatises as those on *Surprising Conversions* and *Distinguishing Marks*. But at the same time with his *Thoughts on the Revival* which spread through his parish, certain unpublished manuscripts show that the Puritan divine's

household was as much engaged in domestic as in ascetic interests. Thus, in some papers preserved from the year 1743, we find a jeweler's account to Mrs. Edwards of "a gold Locket & Chane" for £11, and to Edwards himself two charges, at three months intervals, for "one dozen long pipes." But what is most surprising in these memoranda is an entry for "1 childs Plaything, 4/6," made by the very man accused of calling children "little vipers."

And so too in the following year, and as a further token of the softer side of the great preacher, there remains a portion of a sermon written on a leaf of an old copybook of his daughters Mary and Esther. Of these daughters, it will be remembered, the one was destined to be the mother of the elder President Dwight of Yale College, and the other the mother of Aaron Burr of Princeton College, to the presidency of which institution Jonathan Edwards was himself to be called but only there to die.

But to return to Edwards the mystic and the records of his interior life. How truly he was a philosopher of the feelings, a fervent exponent of the dialectic of the heart, was now shown in the more elaborate writings of his maturity. As the fruit of his earlier meditations and of the thirteen hours of daily study with which he was accredited, the recluse of Northampton, between 1734 and 1746 produced two works of high significance, the one a sermon on *Spiritual Light*, the other a treatise on the *Religious Affections* which was composed in the year in which the College of New Jersey was founded. In the former of these writings the author is a confessed advocate of rational doctrine, for he contends that the spiritual light does not consist in any impression made upon the imagination as when one may be entertained by a romantic description of the pleasantness of fairy-land, or be affected by what one reads in a romance, or sees acted in a stage-play. No, rather as he that beholds objects on the face of the earth, when the light of the sun is cast upon them, is under greater advantage to discern them in their true forms and natural relations, than he that sees them in a dim twilight, so God, in letting light into the soul, deals with man according to his nature and makes use of his rational faculties.

While, so far as Edwards was concerned, the objects of the mystical knowledge were as substantial realities as the mountains of Berkshire, yet he felt obliged to bring home to others the proper rationality of that knowledge. Then, too, the treatise on the *Religious Affections* being called forth by the revival which had meanwhile swept over his parish, the Puritan divine was in a further

difficult position, for he stood midway between the sceptics of his age and those persons who were of abnormal emotional sensibility. On the one side, he explains, are many in these days who condemn the affections which are excited in a way that seems not to be the natural consequences of the faculties and principles of human nature; on the other side are those of a weak and vapory habit of body and of brain easily susceptible of impressions; as a person asleep has dreams of which he is not the voluntary author, so may such persons, in like manner, be the subjects of involuntary impressions, when they are awake. But the true saint belongs to neither of these. In him the divine spirit may co-operate in a silent, secret and un-discernible way, with the use of means, and his own endeavors, and yet even that is not all. Spiritual light may be let into the soul in one way, when it is not in another; in a dead carnal frame, it is as impossible that it should be kept alive in its clearness and strength as it is to keep the light in the room when the candle that gives it is put out, or to maintain the bright sunshine in the air when the sun is gone down.

In many parts of his treatise on the *Religious Affections* the eighteenth century scholar, in a measure, anticipated the results of the modern psychology of religion. But ultimately he was forced to give up the rationality of his thesis that the soul is enabled, by intuition, to progress from the world of shadow to the world of substance and to have recourse to such figures of speech as that, not only does the sun shine in the saints, but they also become little suns, partaking of the nature of the fountain of their light. A similar recourse to the figurative at the expense of the rational was exhibited in the next two treatises of the Massachusetts divine. It was in the midyear of the century that Edwards was forced by an unhappy estrangement from his pastorate at Northampton, and was compelled to engage in arduous missionary labors among the Indians at Stockbridge. Nevertheless he succeeded in composing in these hard times what have been considered the greatest of his works.

In the practical denial of its title; the *Inquiry on the Freedom of the Will* was both an unexpected aid to the beleaguered fortress of Calvinism, and an instrument to give to its author the reputation of being, in logical acuteness, the equal of any disputant bred in the universities of Europe. That *Inquiry* was written under strange circumstances. Far from the haunts of scholarship, on the edge of the Western wilderness, and in actual peril of the inroads of the savages, Edwards is still at pains to stop and explain his method

of investigation by a labored defence of the most abstruse branch of learning—metaphysics. “Let not the whole be rejected,” he exclaims, “as if all were confuted by fixing on it the epithet *metaphysical*. 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. It is by metaphysical arguments only we are able to prove, that the rational soul is not corporeal, that lead or sand cannot sink, that thoughts are not square or round, or do not weigh a pound. . . . It is by metaphysics only that we can demonstrate, that God is not limited to a place, or is not mutable; that he is not ignorant, or forgetful; that it is impossible for him to lie, or be unjust; and that there is one God only, and not hundreds of thousands. And, indeed, we have no strict demonstration of anything, excepting mathematical truths, but by metaphysics.”

Of the contents of the famous *Inquiry on the Will* it is unnecessary to speak; as a sheer *tour de force* it is unsurpassed in the annals of early native philosophy. And yet it is not so dry and abstract as tradition would allow. Even in its initial explanatory sections it contains many touches of concrete imagery. Thus against the supposition that the will may act in a state of perfect indifference, Edwards says that, for example, being asked to touch some square on a chessboard, my mind is not given up to vulgar accident, but makes the choice from foreign considerations, such as the previous determination to touch that which happens to be most in my eye. And against the similar contention that the mind can be in a state of perfect equilibrium, Edwards says that even the involuntary changes in the succession of our ideas, though the cause may not be observed, have as much of a cause as the continual, infinitely various, successive changes of the unevennesses on the surface of the water.

It is another singular fact that, while Edwards was engaged in the most metaphysical of his tasks, he was also exhibiting the most practical side of his character. The philosopher might be reasoning on behalf of the determinism of the will, the doctrine that humanity, in all its acts, is under a fatal necessity; at the same time the man showed the most wilful determination in both private and public affairs. In the very period when the *Enquiry* was under way, Edwards was struggling with dire poverty. There is a pathetic reminder of this in that one of his note-books was written on certain crescent-shaped scraps of thin soft paper, said to have been used by his wife and daughters in making fans.

But domestic straits did not prevent the speculative divine from taking a vital interest in affairs of state. Upon his removal to Stockbridge, shortly after the war with the Indians and French, known as King George's War, Edwards apprised the Speaker of the Massachusetts House of Assembly of the efforts made to induce his charges, the Mohawks, and other tribes of Iroquois, to emigrate into Canada. And another paradoxical contrast between the philosopher and the practical man was seen in the fact that, in the very year in which he was reading the subtle sceptic David Hume, he addressed a letter to one of his Scottish correspondents, on the conduct of the war then waging with the savages. In this letter of 1755 Edwards protested that the English ministry missed it very much in sending over British forces to fight with Indians in America. Let them, he continues, send us arms, ammunition, money and shipping; and let New England men manage the business in their own way, who alone understand it. To appoint British officers over them, is nothing but a hindrance and discouragement to them. Let them be well supplied, and supported, and defended by sea, and let them go forth under their own officers and manage in their own way, as they did in the expedition against Cape Breton.

In the same year as this sagacious letter, and as another evidence of the many-sided character of the Puritan scholar, there was written the most boldly imaginative of his treatises, the *Last End in Creation*. In this, as the author's chief expositor affirms, there appeared, with something of the beauty which had fascinated the vision of his youth, that other element of his thought which, though subordinated, was never annihilated, that conception of God which Plato, Spinoza or Hegel might have held,—the idea of the good, the one substance, the absolute thought unfolding itself or embodying itself in a visible and glorious order. Of this treatise little can be said, save as its poetic imagery completes, as by a golden frame, the portrait of the man. Here there were exhibited those shining conceptions so congruous with the thoughts of the mystic and idealist, for in using the familiar figures of the infinite fountain of good sending forth abundant streams, Edwards did but show what he was wont to call a knowledge in a sense intuitive, "wherein such bright ideas are raised, and such a clear view of a perfect agreement with the excellencies of the Divine Nature, that it is known to be a communication from Him; all the Deity appears in the thing, and in everything pertaining to it."