

# Edwards and the indescribable religious experience



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During the main thrust of the First Great Awakening, when swarms of Americans were being cajoled, terrified, shocked back into church pews, influential preacher John Edwards was busy converting his fair share. Set apart by his subdued style from the over-enthusiastically charismatic oratories of his contemporaries Whitefield and Davenport, Edwards relied instead on his eloquently effective prose to make his impact on the populace. In his trek away from exaggerated fervor, however, he encountered another difficulty: the physical language of humans could not appropriately demonstrate the glorious nature of God's holiness to Edwards' satisfaction. Undaunted, he forged ahead with the steady proliferation of his beliefs, now addressing the continuing difficulty of complete expression through his style. In the specific pieces "Personal Narrative", "A Divine and Supernatural Light" and "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God", Edwards establishes that his willingness to record the failure of language actually exposes his devotion to his faith, despite the fact that his technique simultaneously limits his purpose and expands comprehension. Edwards' predicament is a powerfully ironic one, since his language exists dually as both creator and destructor of his faith. He must use it as the only channel through which to express his adoration, yet it concurrently serves as the dominant obstacle to the purity and ethereal quality of his inner contemplations. Ideally, the solution would be to progress from the level where his words are not fully connected to his meanings into a relationship where they can congregate in a 'heavenly embrace'. However, realizing that this aim is largely impossible, Edwards instead preempts the inevitable difficulties by qualifying the use of language that is not 'pure'. He establishes that the wonder in his soul cannot be described through words, <https://assignbuster.com/edwards-and-the-indescribable-religious-experience/>

pointing out that the divine and supernatural light which he feels in his heart "... is no impression upon the mind, as though one saw anything with the bodily eyes. It is no imagination or idea of an outward light or glory, or any beauty of form or countenance, or a visible luster or brightness of any object" (Edwards, 480). He speaks of the ' immediacy' of God's presence, one that floods his consciousness internally but is intangible through reason. In the first of several recurring oxymorons, he maintains that since one cannot rationalize the way to God, it is imperative to turn to the pure senses to connect to pure adoration. Since love is truly blind, and God has no recognizable taste, no touch, no sound that we are allowed to experience, straining to reach Him with a sort of conglomerate of all these senses would only compound the feeling of religious wonder. Thus confirming the ethereal, indefinable nature of his sentiment, Edwards then tackles the problem of how to nevertheless explain it for his parishioners, and himself. It is to his benefit, therefore, that he chooses to widen the chasm between our perception of God and our ability to describe him. He writes repeatedly that "...this spiritual knowledge...God is the author of, and none else: He reveals it, and flesh and blood reveals it not" (Edwards, 478). Often, he emphasizes the word " author", as opposed to other possibilities like " creator" or " inventor", as if confessing that only God can express in his holy language his own glory, that mere humans cannot because they did not create that glory, as they did their own speech. " Indeed a person cannot have spiritual light without the word", he explains, " but that does not argue, that the word properly causes that light." (Edwards, 484) In this way, Edwards explains that his style is the lesser of two evils; that although his writing cannot completely convey his ardor, at least his ardor is strong enough to lead him

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to express his faith regardless. One of Edward's primary complaints is that he is unable to express the grandeur of his emotion successfully through secular language, so he indicates it instead by highlighting the failure in all of its extremes. Instead of pretending, like some fellow preachers, that the direct, immediate source of his sermons was God himself, Edwards admits frankly that since the blunt language we use to describe God's glory did not actually originate from God, we are not inheritors of some ' holy language' but instead the inventors of a brute one, which now prevents us from properly articulating God's impact. He illustrates this quagmire first by listing successive adjectives almost carelessly, almost as if he's muttering about some obsessive problem to himself, like he's grasping for the right word but just can't find it. Attempting to convey his sudden understanding of holiness, he stutters, "[It]...appeared to me to be of a sweet, pleasant, charming, serene, calm nature" (Edwards, 470). In fact, the lengths of these ' catalogs' of descriptions are nearly heavy-handed in their excessiveness. Furthermore, he uses exceedingly simple imagery that he repeats endlessly. With claims like, " The soul of a true Christian...appeared like such a little white flower..." (Edwards, 470), the tone seems appropriate only for a young child who cannot stomach anything more complex. He uses this technique of crude descriptions to infamous effect in " Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God", when the oft-repeated paintings of dancing devils and scalding flame left his many of his congregations in frantic, naive terror. In addition, Edwards struggles with the mere scope of his passion, declaring that he cannot possibly describe a sensation that is simply too massive to even envision. He turns to paradox, therefore, to serve as metaphor for the inconceivable complexity of God. Using an onslaught of contradictory images like ' a

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majestic meekness' and 'an awful sweetness' (Edwards, 468), he illustrates the quixotic character of his quest to define an entity that could never be contained even with all the definitions of his world. These techniques heavily underscore the lack of finesse and incompetence of language, leaving much of Edwards' prose with a pallor of apparent ineptitude that is distracting when read. Despite the discombobulated effect of these inflated methods, Edwards justifies his choice by coherently explaining each consequence of the disappointment of language. In "A Divine and Supernatural Light", he muses over the concept of infinities upon infinities, qualifying his use of oxymorons by clarifying their purpose: to produce an emotional effect beyond rationality and petty human 'sentiment'. Returning to the arguments in his preemption, he questions, "Would it not be rational to suppose that His speech would be exceeding different from men's speech, that there should be such an excellency and sublimity in His word...that the word of men, yea of the wisest of men, should appear mean and base in comparison of it?" (Edwards, 487). He answers firmly that indeed, to be blessed with a sense of God's gloriousness does not equate to being blessed with the ability to describe it, that pure adoration should not and cannot be adulterated by secularized words. Thus is it interesting that even as Edwards argues that empirically, "there is a difference between believing that a person is beautiful, and having a sense of his beauty. The former may be obtained by hearsay, but the latter only by seeing the countenance" (Edwards, 482), he still labors to explain that awareness. Now, instead of explaining emotion through language, he intends to replicate the emotion using words to create the 'aura' he has experienced. In his "Personal Narrative", he illustrates his uncertainty and indecisiveness by continually <https://assignbuster.com/edwards-and-the-indescribable-religious-experience/>

repeating a number of words in close proximity of each other, such as his use of 'sweet' (Edwards, 468), or spread thin, as he places 'excellent'. By submerging the listener in this warm, gentle flow of pleasant words, he seeks to develop an atmosphere of 'blissful, gentle confusion'. Once the ambiance is set, however, his fondness of repetition bears deeper scrutiny. In reiteration of words, themes, and similar, parallel structure (as in the lines of adjectives), Edwards exposes the interminability of his struggle to reach God through language, the eternal circle of his adulation. The beauty of his love, though it is mundane and recurring like his style, demonstrates his security in his faith, which never undulates, never veers. In "Sinners..." however, he resorts to repetition in order to emphasize the gravity of God's other facade: that of fearsome rage, a concept repeated constantly through the triple appearance of the word 'wrath', "...the fearful danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God whose wrath is provoked...."(Edwards, 505). In addition, the constant reiteration of unstoppable fiery imagery throughout this particular piece through words like 'furnace', 'bottomless pit', 'full' and 'fire' evokes a startlingly successful aura of a gaping, all-consuming inferno. In the same piece exists yet another of his many stylistic methods. Edwards enhances his simple, yet intense imagery with excited punctuation; the proliferation of exclamation points meshes well with the urgent topic matter. In this piece, therefore, his writing seems to take on a violent, assertive flavor, such that his argument becomes all the more frightening in its grotesque reality. Then, in "Personal Narrative", Edwards turns to familiar, subtler sight/taste imagery to express his onslaught of ardor, claiming that "[the delights] were totally of another kind; and what I

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then had no more notion or idea of, than one born blind has of pleasant and beautiful colors...those former delights, never reached the heart; and did not arise from any sight of the diving excellency of the things of God; or any taste of the soul-satisfying and life giving good..."(Edwards, 469). Reiterating the theme of blind passion from the heart, he makes reference to the human body as the most natural vessel from which to drink to true appreciation of God. In the end, only the purest human spirit and senses, and not their by-products, are capable of attaining the level of dedication Edwards describes. Ultimately, Edwards' quandary remains unsolved. However, he does achieve a strange sort of balance between an inflated demonstration of the flaws of language and his justification for using it. Eventually, we as readers of these works come to realize that Edwards' all consuming passion for God has also lead him to present us with a valuable inquiry into the limitations and powerlessness of our words, as the primary articulator of our existence as humans, to fully communicate our purest emotions.