

S. Mark Hamilton. *A Treatise on Jonathan Edwards, Continuous Creation and Christology. A Series of Treatises on Jonathan Edwards, Volume 1. Jonathan Edwards Society Press, 2017. 101 pp. \$17.99 (pbk).*

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Of the many recent approaches taken in Jonathan Edwards Studies, S. Mark Hamilton's work on Edwards's theological notebooks and Hamilton's handling of issues of causality and time, as they relate to the doctrines of God, Creation, and Christology in Edwards, deserve special attention. To his credit, Hamilton demonstrates an impressive creative ability to explain complex material in a relatively easy to understand manner by way of well-illustrated prose. In this first volume of this new series on Jonathan Edwards, Hamilton offers, in the words of his doctoral mentor Oliver D. Crisp, a plausible alternative reading of Edwards's immaterial realism that aims to overcome the apparent incoherence of Edwards's views on continuous creation and occasionalism, as they relate to human moral accountability (9, 56–57, 82).

First, Hamilton identifies an alleged incoherency that concerns whether it is conceivable that human agents be held morally accountable for their actions according to Edwards's doctrine of continuous creation (9). The problem is that on Edwards's account, it appears that the world—its objects and created human minds—“persist through time for no more than a moment.” It is as if the world and all its creatures cease to exist, whereupon “facsimiles” of the world and its objects are “re-created anew *ex nihilo*” (9). How, therefore, can people be held accountable for their actions, given their almost illusory existence? Hamilton overcomes this alleged incoherence by distinguishing between the stability of created human minds, as they “endure” across time, on the one hand, and the mind's moment-to-moment percepts of mind-independent reality, that is, ideas that “exdure” across time, on the other. In other words, “created minds exist apart from their own perceptions” (47). Created minds are not created anew every moment, but the mind's percepts are. The mind's percepts are part of a dependent reality, dependent upon God for their existence, an existence that God re-creates every moment (47). By way of this distinction, which stresses that human minds are real, existing and persisting across “temporal stages,” unlike “percepts that God is re-creating at every moment,” Hamilton believes that he has rehabilitated Edwards's account of continuous creation, and overcome the problem of human accountability for moral action (47). Hamilton says that his proposal offers a “slight revision” of what he calls the anti-realist position of “the majority report” on Edwards's doctrine of continuous creation (11, 35, 44, 47).

Second, Hamilton applies the distinction that created minds are distinct from mind-independent reality to the created mind of the God-man. He therefore applies his revision of Edwards's account of continuous creation to Edwards's Christology, which Hamilton calls

“continuous Christology” (61, 63). The anti-realist position of “the majority report” on Edwards’s account of continuous creation is alleged to be incoherent when applied to the created mind of the God-man (10, 75, 91). Hamilton, however, offers and applies an immaterial realist framework to resolve the dilemma of how to hold Jesus of Nazareth accountable for his human action, since under anti-realist assumptions, on Edwards’s account of continuous creation, Jesus possesses a mind created anew, again and again, with almost an imperceptible amount of time passing moment to moment. Furthermore, Hamilton claims that the metaphysical framework that supports the human nature and moral action of the God-man also supports and therefore applies to all other human natures, that is, to human nature in general (10, 91).

Third, Hamilton responds in chapter three to the alleged incoherency of the “inseparable conceptual link,” made according to Hamilton by contemporary interpreters of Edwards’s doctrine, between Edwards’s account of occasionalism (God as sole causal agent to the exclusion of secondary causal agents) and continuous creation (47–48). The issue here for Hamilton is how Edwards understands secondary causes, such as human agency and the law of causality, given his view that Edwards is an occasionalist (47–50, 57). For, if God is the sole causal agent of all events and human action that come to pass (as in the occasionalist doctrine), how can humans be held accountable for their action? On this account, how does Edwards avoid the charge of making God the author of sin? Again, Hamilton believes that Edwards’s immaterial realism combined with several distinctions concerning causation resolve the problem. One distinction of which is Edwards’s doctrine of God’s emanation and direct communication of himself to human minds (50–52).

Scholars dispute whether Edwards was an occasionalist. In reference to Crisp, Stephen A. Wilson writes, “The strongest case for Edwards’s occasionalism yet made must in the end admit that some of the textual evidence is based on interpretations that have equally plausible non-occasionalist readings.”¹ Furthermore, it appears to me that Hamilton, like Crisp, blurs the line between occasionalism and continuous creation, as if the former is a species of the latter. But the two are entirely distinct philosophical concepts. There is a difference between God as the sole-source of creation, that is, creation *ex nihilo*, in the doctrines of continuous creation and conservation, on the one hand, and God as the sole-causal agent, as in occasionalism, on the other. All agree that Edwards holds that God’s continuous creation and conservation is “an immediate production out of nothing, at each moment.”² But, Hamilton says that “God’s intimate conservation of creation is certainly not at odds with secondary causes,” as if there were a doubt whether conservation of creation included secondary causes. An occasionalist would exclude secondary causes, but not someone who holds to the doctrine of continuous creation and its conservation (50). The confusion lies in not conceiving of the difference between God as “the sole-source” of

1. Stephen A. Wilson, *Virtue Reformed: Rereading Jonathan Edwards’s Ethics*, Brill’s Studies in Intellectual History 132 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 180; Oliver D. Crisp, “How ‘Occasional’ was Edwards’s Occasionalism?,” in *Jonathan Edwards Philosophical Theologian*, eds. Paul Helm and Oliver D. Crisp (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 74.

2. Jonathan Kvanvig and David Vander Laan, “Creation and Conservation,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/creation-conservation>. Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1985, 2017), s.v. “creatio continuata.”

continued creation, each moment, *ex nihilo*, on the one hand, and God as the sole cause (occasionalism), “without the aid of created things, either as causal co-agents or as patients,” on the other. For Edwards, “creation and conservation is an *ex nihilo* act,” but that does not make him an occasionalist, according to Jonathan Kvanvig and David Vander Laan.³ Peter Van Mastricht (1630–1706), the theologian whom Edwards highly esteems, teaches that continuous creation is part and parcel of conservation, that successive moments of time are such that “the past is no more, the future is not yet, and the present passes . . . time does not exist except in one simultaneous moment, since the preceding moment ceases to exist.”⁴ Furthermore, there is a difference between the proposition that God is the sole cause and the Reformed doctrine of God’s sovereignty in what they call a *previous* (logically prior) concurrence of divine and human causation, at the same moment.

In chapter three, Hamilton refers to a statement by William Ames that indeed discusses secondary causation. But he does not draw out the classic distinctions with which Ames is working in that paragraph, namely, the “previous motion” and concurrence of God as first cause, and human agents as second causes (48–9n9). Ames abstracts this distinction from the classical distinction between *in potentia* and *in actu*. What is missing in Hamilton’s discussion is Ames’s classic-Reformed discussion of first and second acts in the doctrine of continuous creation and conservation, and providence, and how this robust formulation of these doctrines helps “square secondary and occasional causes”—a goal which Hamilton has in his thesis—and relieves the tension between human agency and accountability and divine agency and accountability, without mixing in the occasionalist notion that God is the sole causal agent. In a first act, God contingently moves upon a human agent to impart causal powers, to empower, and endow him or her to be able to act, or for instance, to believe, in what is then the second act. Importantly, the individual’s freedom to act is not violated, but rather perfected, according to Ames. The individual human agent is morally accountable for his or her actions.⁵ Ames’s discussion clears God from being the author of sin by explaining how humans are empowered to be responsible agents. I think that Hamilton is confusing Ames’s explanation of “predetermination of secondary causes,” which Ames locates in the doctrines of providence and continuous creation and conservation, with the doctrine of occasionalism.

Furthermore, Hamilton goes on to discuss God’s emanating communication of himself to humankind in combination with a discussion of secondary causes, both natural and human. Hamilton’s reference to “natural causes” in Edwards’s *Freedom of the Will* correctly aligns them with other second causes, those acts of the human will, which operate according to moral necessity (48n9). The natural causes referred to by Edwards, such as, when wounded, we feel pain, when we see the truth of a proposition, we assent, have a necessity closely related to the moral necessity of acts of the will, in Edwards’s view.⁶ But is Hamilton

3. Ibid.

4. Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretico-Practica Theologia, Qua, Per Singula Capita Theologica, Pars Exegetica, Dogmatica, Elenctica & Practica, Perpetuâ Successione Coniugantur*. (Utrecht: Thomae Appels, 1699). “De Existentia and Cognitione Dei,” 67; “De Nominibus Dei,” 87, “De Aeternitate Dei,” 130.

5. William Ames, *Rescriptio Scholastica et Brevis Ad Nicolaus Grevinchovii Responsum Illud Prolixum, Quod Opposuit Dissertationi de Redemptione Generali, et Electione Ex Fide Praevisa, Rev. Ed.* (Harderwijk: Nicolai à Uvieringen, 1645), 146–47.

6. *Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 1, Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957), 156–7. (Henceforth, WJE 1).

satisfied with Edwards's notion that the necessity of natural causes supports the idea of human moral accountability, especially if, as Hamilton says, Edwards holds that God is the sole agent and that humans act according to a principle of moral necessity, not unlike natural causes? For even if natural causes and human inclination are created anew every moment, presumably they are the same laws, causes, and dispositions as in the prior moment. If so, then without a simultaneous, contingent, alternative possibility at each moment, Hamilton's proposal remains committed to an ontology of necessity. Individual freedom is therefore violated, and moral accountability removed, the very accountability for which Hamilton was aiming to secure for Edwards.

According to Hamilton, the *majority report* with its anti-realist assumptions understands that there is a problem with Edwards's strongly linked doctrines of continuous creation and occasionalism, if by these doctrines Edwards means to say that the world and human minds, including the human mind of Jesus, cease to exist every moment in the sense of being destroyed. This is the view to which Crisp holds.⁷ But the issue of whether both minds and percepts persist across time is a challenge for the doctrine of continuous creation, not occasionalism.

Correctly, I think, Hamilton, contrary to Crisp, interprets Edwards use of the phrase "the past entirely ceases" to mean something akin to its being "archived," not destroyed. They are like "stages" that are "re-indexed" (56). The significance of Hamilton's observation that Edwards's account of continuous creation states that past stages are *archived*, not destroyed, is that Hamilton thereby aims to resolve the alleged difficulty of squaring human accountability with a model that holds that minds—including the created mind of Jesus—and ideas presented to those minds, exist but for an imperceptible moment of time. Hamilton's break with past views offers the thesis that makes a distinction between minds, which according to stage theory are constant as they "endure across temporal stages," and ideas, which "exdure across them" (36). Concerning point two and what Hamilton calls continuous Christology, he claims that Edwards's "Spirit Christology" helps reconcile the identity of humankind with the federal headship of Adam by what Edwards calls "the constitution of nature and the law of union" (67–68n17). That is, Adam and his descendants coexist, forming, as it were, one complex person. Likewise, all elect persons participate in the human nature of the God-man. In what he calls a "fusion theory," Hamilton explains this participation by means of a "collective-nature-perichoresis," that is, "the interpenetration of Christ's human nature *en masse* with those to whom he is a-temporally united" (66–69). It is arguably the case, however, that the dependent contingent individual human nature (body, soul, and mind) of the God-man is dependent upon the second *person*—not nature—of the Trinity, upon the Son, not the Spirit. Perhaps, when Edwards writes of "the love of the Son of God to the human nature," Hamilton should understand Edwards to be referring to the one unique individual human nature of Jesus, which was assumed in the incarnation, not human nature in general (71n22, 72).

Furthermore, Hamilton's theory rests on an unequivocal communicability of individual human natures. Indeed, the God-man and human beings both have an individual human nature. But there is a problem. How does Hamilton resolve the problem of applying the principle of communicability without equivocation to both God and humans, since there

7. Oliver D. Crisp, "Jonathan Edwards's Ontology: A Critique of Sang Hyun Lee's Dispositional Account of Edwardsian Metaphysics," *Religious Studies* 46:1 (2010), 10.

are as many individual human natures as there are individual human persons, whereas there is only one individual divine nature, borne by the three persons in the Trinity? The consequence of three bearers of the one divine nature is that the divine nature is not, in turn, the bearer of the individual human nature of Christ, rather, the person of the Son is.⁸ Hamilton suggests that, in Edwards's theory, God substantializes human nature *in general*, such that all human natures are dependent on God, resulting in what he calls a "collective relation in human nature" (71–72). But Hamilton doesn't distinguish this Thomist "collective" Christological view of humanity from the innovative Scotist view of "essential individuality" (*haecceitas*).

Furthermore, which approach does more justice to Chalcedon, which to Augustinian Trinitarian theology? Hamilton says that his formulation of Edwards's Christology remains true to the "councilor conditions for orthodoxy," that "the Son assumes what the councils call a 'reasonable soul and body'" (14, 34n13, 78). But Hamilton doesn't clearly situate Edwards's Trinitarian orthodoxy. Contrary to the Thomist collective view of human nature, crucial to Hamilton's thesis, the Scotist view is arguably more in line with Chalcedon which notably does not claim that Jesus was both fully God and fully man. Rather, our Lord Jesus Christ is, according to Chalcedon, "true God and true man." God the Son did not assume human nature in general, but one unique individual man. Christ has not a human nature common to all humans, but is one unique human being.

Given Hamilton's systematic approach and interests, the reader, however, may miss the historical identification of and interaction with Edwards's approach to the topic. In particular, although Hamilton's thesis touches on some of the following principles, he rarely identifies, nor provides engagement with Edwards's appropriation of the principles used in his day, such as, the principle of the imperceivability of the succession of time, the principle of sufficient reason and its corollary law of causality, according to which, as Edwards says, "nothing ever comes to pass without a cause" and "whatsoever begins to be . . . must have a cause," the principle of the infinite divisibility of matter, the Boethian formula of eternity, and Newtonian universal laws of motion and gravitation. All of these principles are explicitly used in Edwards's *Freedom of the Will* (1754) and relate to Hamilton's treatise.⁹

Edwards's use of the principles of the imperceivability of the succession of time and of sufficient reason are relevant to Hamilton's thesis on time and stage theory. On Hamilton's view of Edwards's stage theory "there is a potentially indeterminate and duration-less number of temporal and spatial [...] stages that might be conceived" (34n12). Contrary to Hamilton's thesis that Edwards's doctrine of continuous creation implies that God can bring into existence an "indeterminate" number of temporal and spatial parts of any given object, across the duration of its existence, it is arguably the case that Edwards holds to a *determinate* number of events, and series of events, without the possibility of the series being otherwise than they are, since their number, place, time, rest and motion are determined by God by moral necessity. Edwards bases his conclusion on the principle of sufficient reason, and the theory of "superior fitness" in relation to the doctrine of the "infinite divisibility of matter." He concludes that "It will not follow, that there is an infinite number of numerically different possible bodies, perfectly alike, among which God chooses, by a self-determining

8. Nico Den Bok, Martinus Bac, and Andreas J. Beck, "More Than Just an Individual: Scotus's Concept of Person from the Christological Context of Lectura III 1," *Franciscan Studies* 66 (2008): 188–191.

9. WJE 1: 181–83, 200, 268, 383, 385–93.

power, when he goes about to create bodies.” Nor does Edwards allow for the “transposition” of two otherwise equally alike bodies. This, too, Edwards bases on the principle of sufficient reason, that is, that there is a reason why God positions two otherwise alike atoms in their circumstances, as to place, time, rest, and motion.¹⁰ How could a series of events be otherwise than they are? For if they were, reasons Edwards, then there would be, as Hamilton points out, “innumerable things consequential” and “out of joint” (37n16). Grave consequences would follow. Hamilton alludes to Newton’s universal “laws of motion and gravitation” but does not identify Edwards’s appeal to Newton to support Edwards’s ontology of necessity, that “however the effect is insensible for the present,” even the most subtle shift in the placement of but one atom in the universe might “make a vast alteration with regard to millions of important events.”¹¹ Though the entire universe and the placement of every single atom be reconstituted ever anew every moment, according to Edwards’s ontology of necessity, there is no possibility that anything be otherwise than it is. Thus, I think the notion of ‘indetermination’ runs contrary to Edwards’s stated principles that undergird an ontology of necessity, and not an ontology of possibility and contingency. At issue is how Edwards’s doctrines of continuous creation combined with an ontology of necessity are coherent. How does one square these doctrines with human agent’s moral accountability?

Finally, I commend Hamilton for offering fresh critical analysis, systematic reflection, and innovative solutions to the alleged incoherence of attributing moral accountability to human agents, including Jesus, given Edwards’s doctrine of continuous creation *ex nihilo*, at every moment across time, which appears to make human existence illusory, and removes humans from the possibility of accountability. Indeed, Hamilton’s unique proposal of using stage theory to distinguish created minds from percepts, the latter of which are created anew *ex nihilo* moment to moment, but not the former, effectively removes the alleged incoherency inherent in traditional accounts of Edwards’s doctrines of continuous creation and Christology. I would argue, however, that it is Edwards’s ontology of moral necessity, which is absent any notion of contingency, that makes it difficult not only to hold human agents accountable for their action, but also to exonerate God from the accusation that he is the author of evil. The (mis)identification of continuous creation with occasionalism draws the focus away from resolving the larger problem of squaring moral accountability for human action with an ontology of moral necessity. Nevertheless, Hamilton has achieved his goal of offering “philosophical clarity” to Edwards’s Christology. His treatise is set to be an indispensable reference, especially for Edwards scholars who are constructing a coherent philosophical theology.

10. WJE 1: 391, 387, 391, 389, 388.

11. WJE 1: 392-3.