

# Introduction

In the past few decades there has been a renaissance in philosophical theology. In particular, there has been an increasing interest from analytic philosophers in the analysis of theological doctrines.<sup>1</sup> Alongside this, there has been a renewed interest from philosophers in classical theologians of the past, who have often wrestled with the philosophical issues that their theological commitments raise, with a greater rigour and sophistication than some modern theology does.<sup>2</sup> These thinkers have become dialogue partners, and resources for addressing contemporary philosophical concerns. This concatenation of philosophical and historical interests means that the study of Jonathan Edwards from the perspective of philosophical theology may draw on an increasing body of specialized literature which tackles many of the issues Edwards was interested in, with a technical rigour that Edwards would have wholeheartedly approved of.

This book is an attempt to assess Edwards' theological contribution on the concept of sin, or hamartiology, an area of his work that he thought through with considerable care, from the perspective of this particular philosophical literature. What he had to say on the metaphysics of the fall, original sin, guilt and the imputation of sin were highly original contributions to philosophical theology that are far from being facile or merely antique. In each of these areas of sin he sought to rethink traditional Reformed doctrines in light of early Enlightenment philosophy in ways that took him beyond the boundaries of his own theological tradition in important respects.

However, this should not be taken to suggest that Edwards' hamartiology was a break with that tradition. What is presented herein is not a 'strange new Edwards'.<sup>3</sup> He strove to make the puritanical doctrinal legacy relevant in the very different conditions in which he found himself. That meant reformulation and development, but not, as far as he was concerned, departure from that tradition. Nevertheless, the developments he instituted were important, and were linked with central tenets of the whole of his philosophical and theological vision, such as his occasionalism and idealism.<sup>4</sup>

What emerges from this study is a picture of sustained and careful thought about a central and defining cluster of philosophical issues pertaining to Christian theology. Edwards was not able, in the final analysis, to reconcile different aspects of his view of sin into one coherent whole. Nor was he able to resolve to his own satisfaction, problems that remained with respect to the content of the doctrines themselves. But what he did do was raise the standard of discussion about this cluster of issues to a new level of limpidity and philosophical acuity. In doing so, he clarified what the central problems are that philosophical theologians need to attend to in their analyses of sin. And this, I submit, is no small contribution to the ongoing discussion.

Philosophers and theologians would do well to take the Edwardsian doctrine of sin a great deal more seriously.

### **The Task of the Present Work**

This is not the first exploration of Edwards' doctrine of sin in the literature.<sup>5</sup> But prior to this study, there has not been a comprehensive account of the metaphysics that Edwards used to underpin his doctrine of sin. The present volume sets out to remedy this lacuna. However, this is not simply a critical exposition of Edwards' hamartiology. There are other places that the reader may find such an account.<sup>6</sup> Instead, this is an analysis of the central structures of the metaphysics of sin in Edwards' philosophical theology. These central structures comprise (a) the doctrine of the divine decrees, (b) the problem of accounting for the first (human) sin, (c) the question of the authorship of sin, (d) the problem of the imputation of sin and (e) the question of original guilt.

Axiomatic to Edwards' discussion of sin are several issues that are now hotly contested. For instance, he believed in the Calvinistic notion of the depravity of humanity. That is, he believed that all human agents are born with a vitiated moral nature that prevents them from ever turning to God without divine grace enabling them so to do. The whole force of his treatise *Original Sin* (hereinafter *OS*) was to defend this notion against what he saw as 'Arminian' intrusions into the common, Reformed opinion in these matters.<sup>7</sup> We shall not be assessing whether Edwards' doctrine of depravity is defensible, but whether central structures in his doctrine of sin that rely upon this notion that all human agents are inherently sinful, yield a coherent whole or not. It seems to me that if these structures can be made to work together, then Edwards will have gone some considerable way towards demonstrating that his intuition about depravity was at least plausible.

A second contentious issue that Edwards assumed to be true in his discussions of sin was a pre-critical view of the inspiration and authority of Scripture. This means that, when he discusses the fall of Adam and Eve, he assumes that this is a historic event, and that the narrative of the primeval prologue of Genesis 1–3 is a historically accurate account of how Adam and Eve fell. It might be thought that the very fact that Edwards believed this means that his doctrine of original sin can no longer have a constructive use in current theological discussions on the nature of sin. However, this is an overhasty conclusion. Whether one takes the view that the fall is historic or not, the questions Edwards raises about the coherence of traditional problems in hamartiology, such as the fall, still require an answer from contemporary theologians. And it does not appear that one has to assent to Edwards' assumptions on the inspiration and authority of Scripture to find his arguments useful tools in contemporary reflection upon these issues, any more than one need believe that the ontological argument is a coherent, independent argument for the existence of God, to think that Anselm's perfect being theology has important and ongoing insights for contemporary philosophical

theologians. Edwards' thinking on sin still has much of value for contemporary philosophical theologians.

The present work falls into several parts. To begin with, we shall examine Edwards' doctrine of the divine decrees that lie behind what he has to say about the nature of sin. We shall see that what he has to say about the divine decrees has important implications for the rest of his discussion of sin in the created order. Then, we shall turn to the analysis of the doctrine of the fall and the origin of sin. This involves considering related issues pertaining to the fall, the authorship of sin and the secret and revealed will of God. We then proceed to outline his theology of imputation, before assessing the coherence of his doctrines of original sin, original guilt and its imputation. In so doing, we shall have to take a tour of the doctrine of temporal parts and recent philosophical reflection on this, as well as touching on issues of personal identity and identity through time. Finally, there is an assessment of Edwards' contribution to philosophical theology on the doctrine of sin, with particular reference to Edwards' doctrine of occasionalism.

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## Notes

- 1 Examples abound. Here are a sample of three recent authors: Swinburne's *Responsibility and Atonement*, Jonathan L. Kvanvig's *The Problem of Hell* and Thomas Morris' *The Logic of God Incarnate*.
- 2 Once again, there are a plethora of examples. Here is a small sample: Marilyn McCord Adams' work on Ockham and Anselm; the renewed interest in Molina from those concerned with issues surrounding Middle Knowledge, such as Alfred Freddoso and Thomas Flint; the theological appropriation of Leibniz by Robert Adams; the interest in Augustine across a wide range of fields. See, in this regard, *The Augustinian Tradition*, ed. Gareth B. Matthews, and the use of Edwards in particular by Roderick Chisholm, Philip Quinn, William Wainwright, Jonathan Kvanvig, Hugh McCann, Alvin Plantinga and Paul Helm.
- 3 At least one recent monograph has sought to demonstrate just this with respect to Edwards' views on the unregenerate and their eternal destiny. See Gerald McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods* and the review of this by Oliver D. Crisp in *International Journal of Systematic Theology*.
- 4 Occasionalism is the doctrine that God re-creates everything that exists out of nothing, at each moment, coupled with a causal thesis, that God alone is the sole causal agent of all things. For present purposes, idealism is the view that the world consists of ideas and minds perceiving these ideas. There is no material substance to speak of.
- 5 The most important previous study is C. Samuel Storms, *Tragedy in Eden: Original Sin in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards*. However, Storms' treatment is almost exclusively historical and theological in content. His work is concerned to trace the difference between Edwards' work in *Original Sin* and that of Edwards' opponent, John Taylor. They are, according to Storms, typical of the debate between New England Calvinistic Protestantism and Enlightenment deistic and Arminian thought respectively. The present study is not concerned with the historical detail of Edwards' milieu. It is a philosophical treatment of a family of theological doctrines that Edwards spent a considerable amount of his time in defending in his later treatises.

- 6 See, for example, John H. Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards, Volume II*, chapters XX–XIV.
- 7 It is not clear that Edwards set himself against classical Arminianism, which, as Paul Ramsey explains, maintained that ‘the Divine decrees were conditional, or dependent on God’s foreknowledge of the faith in believers, and that Christ’s atonement made possible, although not actual, the salvation of everyone’. It seems that by the eighteenth century, “‘Arminianism” became but a loose term for all forms of the complaint of the aggrieved moral nature against the hard tenets of Calvinism’, Ramsey, Editor’s Introduction, *YEI*: 3.