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Jonathan Edwards and the lapsarian debate

Michael Allen
Knox Theological Seminary, Fort Lauderdale, Florida 33308
mallen@knoxseminary.edu

Abstract

Contrary to what might be expected from such a thinker, Jonathan Edwards was restrained in conversation with the Reformed debate about the order of the divine decrees, known as the infralapsarian/supralapsarian debate. I will address Edwards's caution regarding this particular debate: first, by tracing the contours of the broader Reformed debate on the divine decrees and its evolution from engagement of Arminian theology to that of theodicy; second, by noting where Edwards does not speak to this debate and exegeting the few passages where he does take it up; third, by analysing the particular questions that Edwards addresses when he does engage the debate; fourth, by pointing to constructive lessons gained by understanding why a careful thinker might be atypically silent. I will demonstrate that Edwards engaged the lapsarian debate insofar as was necessary to rebuke the Arminian denial of unconditional election, yet he refused to engage the debate as a means of articulating a theodicy. In both his engagement and disengagement, Edwards refused to answer the debate on its standard terms and offers an example of carefully crafting doctrine according to theological and contextual concerns.

Jonathan Edwards was rarely speechless.[1] Not only did Edwards tend to have opinions and arguments, he managed to record his ponderings on topics as widespread as laughter, evil, beauty, spiders, virtue and even smutty books. Edwards's reputation as a profound thinker flows from his wide-ranging intellectual engagement with issues as diverse as philosophy and scriptural interpretation, cultural engagement and revivalistic assessment. Edwards's restraint in one of the great debates of his day can leave modern readers quite surprised. While he engaged in the perennial debate regarding election in his treatises *On the Freedom of Will* and *Original Sin*, Edwards was restrained in conversation with the Reformed debate about the order of the divine decrees, known as the infralapsarian/supralapsarian debate. I will address Edwards's caution regarding this particular debate: first, by tracing the contours of the broader Reformed debate on the divine decrees; second, by noting where he does not speak to this debate and exegeting the few passages where he does

[1] My thanks to Dr Mark Noll for his extensive comments on this article.

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take it up; third, by analysing the particular questions that Edwards addresses when he does engage the debate; fourth, by pointing to constructive lessons gained by understanding why a careful thinker might be atypically silent.

Ordering of the divine decrees in the Reformed tradition

Only recently has the lapsarian debate of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries reappeared with vigour in scholarly circles.[2] Lack of interest in immediately preceding decades regarding this primarily intra-Reformed debate should not be taken as a universal neglect. In fact, discussions regarding the ordering of the divine decrees (particularly those of creation and redemption) were commonplace in the *summa* of many a Protestant scholastic. To summarise the debates, Karl Barth provides a helpful introduction:

> In the controversy between the 17th Century Supralapsarians and Infralapsarians the point at issue is the *obiectum praedestinationis* . . . the question is put in this way: What do we mean when we say that from all eternity man was elected by God, or . . . rejected by God? Is it that in His eternal election God was thinking simply of man, man as not yet created but still to be created, man as not yet fallen but still to fall by divine permission and human action? Or is it that He was thinking of man as already created and already fallen in virtue of this divine permission and human action? In other words, is the one elected or rejected *homo creabilis et labilis*, or is he *homo creatus et lapsus*?[3]

Barth has noted the two positions: humans are elected to redemption in Christ and, therefore, elected unto creation and fall *or* humans are elected to redemption in Christ after election unto creation and fall. Barth critiques both positions for considering election as a *decretum absolutum* (hidden from human knowledge and ordered unto deterministic fate) and for these two

[2] See Richard Mouw, 'Another Look at the Infra/Supralapsarian Debate', *Calvin Theological Journal* 35 (2000), pp. 136–51. Mouw argues here and elsewhere for the importance of the infralapsarian position to Reformed efforts at cultural engagement. This concern will be engaged historically and constructively below. Robert L. Reymond has also discussed the lapsarian debates in his *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (2nd edn; Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), pp. 479–502. Reymond has classical concerns as opposed to the issues of christology and culture that Mouw considers.

[3] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, *The Doctrine of God*, trans. G. W. Bromiley et al., ed. G. W. Bromiley et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), p. 127.

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reasons will reject both positions as they stand.[4] Barth's critique deserves note at this point simply to make explicit what is at stake – whether God ordains the redemption and damnation of humans prior to choosing to create them and prior to the decree to permit their fall into sin. Francis Turretin further simplifies the issue: *what kind* of human is elect?[5]

Reformed theologians were not unaware that this debate seems to posit temporality in the mind of the Almighty. All Reformed theologians affirmed the notion of divine simplicity. Heinrich Heppe notes that causes and effects are evident in the decrees of God, though not sequential in the actual mental processions of God.[6] Humans can see necessities of cause and effect; however, God does not decree in any temporal fashion. Such an ordering might seem to be merely speculative and, therefore, open to Barth's pejorative title, *decretum absolutum*. Yet Heppe cannot be dismissed as merely speculative, for he notes that the ordering must be derived purely from scripture. Divine revelation (in the activity of Word and Spirit focused in the scripture) allows for epistemic optimism such that 'there is nothing to prevent the institution of some order in them [the divine decrees], considered objectively and from our side according to our mode of conceiving'.[7] Turretin notes that not only is it *a propos* to observe an ordering, but the divine decrees actually *require* an ordering, which can, of course, be ascertained by the faithful reading of the scriptures in the illumination of the Spirit.[8] The Reformed theologians of the seventeenth century diligently pursued the proper ordering of the divine decrees, demonstrating their great epistemic optimism and belief that God's ways could be discerned by a Spirit-led thinking-after the divine mind.

The Reformed initially engaged in this debate as a means by which to defeat the lingering Arminian teaching which they considered dangerously Pelagian.[9] Arminians set out their own order of the divine decrees in which the decree to save people in Christ was God's first decree. Those whose faith is foreseen are then decreed to be redeemed in Christ, leading to a wholly contingent election and resistible grace which, according to Turretin, failed

[4] Barth provides a masterful summary of the debate (ibid., pp. 127–39) and notes the correctives which place him in a heavily modified supralapsarian position (ibid., pp. 139–45).

[5] Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1, trans. George M. Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992), p. 341.

[6] Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics as Set out and Illustrated from the Sources*, trans. G. T. Thomson, ed. Ernst Bizer (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978), p. 135.

[7] Ibid., p. 146.

[8] Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, p. 417.

[9] Ibid., p. 419.

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to 'touch what election means'.[10] In attempting to refute this Arminian ordering, Reformed theologians from Beza to Turretin and Heppe articulated their own orderings, each of which fell into one of two camps. The first camp, the supralapsarians, ordered the decrees thus:

1. God decrees to glorify himself in the salvation of some humans in Christ.
2. God decrees to create the world and both kinds of humans.
3. God decrees that all humans will fall.
4. God decrees to redeem the elect (now fallen) by the person of Christ.
5. God decrees to unite the elect (now fallen) to Christ by means of faith.[11]

The other side, the infralapsarians, objected that one cannot decree the election of non-existent beings.[12] Therefore, the decree of creation must precede the decree of election. Also, election presupposes the presence of sin; therefore, the decree to permit the fall must precede the decree to elect some to salvation.[13] The infralapsarian scheme is as follows:

1. God decrees to glorify himself in the creation of the world and humanity.
2. God decrees that all humans will fall.
3. God decrees to glorify himself in electing some humans to salvation in Christ.
4. God decrees to redeem the elect by the person of Christ.
5. God decrees to unite the elect to Christ by means of faith.[14]

The infralapsarians found the strength of their ordering to lie in its obvious parallel to the actual outworking of events.[15] Exactly at this point the supralapsarians disagreed, positing that 'what is last in occurrence is first in intention [and so on]'.[16]

Less than clear is the degree to which parties distinguished the lapsarian debate from debate regarding the role of God in the occurrence of the first sin: as authoring, permitting or decreeing it. Turretin claims that 'it is not inquired whether the creation of man and the permission of the fall come under the decree of God (for it is acknowledged on both sides that

[10] Ibid.
[11] This is a modified form of the most helpful chart in Reymond, *New Systematic Theology*, p. 488.
[12] Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, p. 343.
[13] Ibid., p. 346.
[14] This is a modified form of the most helpful chart in Reymond, *New Systematic Theology*, p. 480.
[15] Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 157.
[16] Ibid., p. 159.

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this as well as that was determined by God)'.[17] But he later notes that the supralapsarian scheme implies that 'God determined to create that he might destroy [some of] them'.[18] But the intended destruction of certain creatures cannot be an objection to either ordering, if Turretin's claim that both sides acknowledge the decretal permission of the fall is true. Certainly the debate swirled around the questions of evil (whether it be privative, violent or otherwise), hell (whether it be loss, defeat or possess some positive value) and atonement (be it particular or indefinite). In engaging the question of theodicy and divine culpability, the doctrinal debate had gone well beyond mere denial of Arminian–Pelagian orderings. A certain shift in theological concern occurred at some point such that what began as a refutation of Arminian orderings acquired a broader, systemic function – engaging the relationship of God and the actuality of evil. In so doing, the lapsarian debate represented greater concerns and found no fixed consensus amongst the Reformed (though the infralapsarian scheme has always found confessional preference).[19] These greater concerns revolved around the reality of sin, evil and hell within a world providentially guided by the sovereign God, granting the debate an existential importance which every mother of a dying child, every repentant sinner and every struggling share-cropper could appreciate.

The Reformed tradition never achieved monolithic form.[20] Both infralapsarian (Turretin) and supralapsarian (Beza) theologians attained influential status. As time went on, the tension between the two camps led to the formation of mediating positions (Peter van Mastricht). Stephen R. Holmes has argued that Edwards, given his impulses for synthesis, should have been expected to land somewhere in the middle with his favourite teacher, van Mastricht.[21] Aware of the deep similarities between the Reformed theologians who participated in the lapsarian debate and Edwards (rich metaphysical interest, Reformed emphasis on history, use of scholastic methodology and epistemic optimism) and having noted that Edwards read

[17] Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, p. 342.

[18] Ibid., p. 344.

[19] While Dordt endorsed an infralapsarian schema, there was no condemnation of supralapsarians. For the diversity of orderings among the Reformed, see Richard A. Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), pp. 4–12.

[20] See esp. Carl Trueman, 'Calvin and Calvinism', in Donald K. McKim (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to John Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 225–44; J. V. Fesko, *Diversity within the Reformed Tradition: Calvin, Dort, and Westminster* (Greenville, SC: Reformed Academic Press, 2003).

[21] Stephen R. Holmes, *God of Grace and God of Glory: An Account of the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000), p. 128.

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with appreciation many of the primary voices in this debate, I will now examine certain texts in which Edwards engages these issues. Surprisingly, he usually dodges the issue and, when it is touched upon, exercises a great and surprising restraint.

Jonathan Edwards on the divine decrees

Jonathan Edwards knew of the lapsarian debate. He even engaged it. That he engaged it says very little. Rather, the fact that he said very little in engaging it says quite a bit. Most of all, the particular nature of what he said in engaging it (both implicitly and explicitly) tells a great deal about his assessment of the debate. My investigation of his relation to this debate will assess what he said and did not say.

The first thing to note in Edwards's relationship to the lapsarian debate is his relative silence. With the exception of two miscellanies, he simply does not engage the issue. Most tellingly, Edwards's 400-page discussion of the nature of moral freedom, sin and divine sovereignty in *Freedom of Will* does not address the lapsarian debate. Edwards then devotes an entire scholarly treatise to the issues surrounding the doctrine of *Original Sin*; it is a dense book that covers many related topics, but not the lapsarian debate. While silence can hardly be the final arbiter, it tends to point to Edwards's relative restraint in regard to this issue. He simply does not seem to follow his usual metaphysical, Reformed, scholastic, epistemically optimistic mould on this subject. Attention must now turn to the two texts where Edwards does engage the issue: Miscellanies 700 and 704.[22]

Edwards first discusses the lapsarian debate without using those exact words in 'Miscellany 700'. Edwards here counters the Arminian notion that divine decrees of reprobation and election rest upon the divine foresight of human action/response to divine summons and grace. Edwards splits the discussion into two asymmetrical parts as he contends that: (1) God decrees the reprobation of sinners qua sinners; and (2) God decrees the gracious election of sinners qua sinners. Though that division may not seem asymmetrical, its asymmetry comes to light when viewed in comparison with the typical Arminian scheme which can be ideally reproduced as follows: (1) God decrees the reprobation of sinners qua sinners; and (2) God decrees the gracious election of sinners qua faithful. The asymmetrical difference appears in only one place. Whereas Arminians consider God's election of sinners unto salvation in Christ to be contingent upon God's foreknowledge

[22] See 'Miscellany 700' and 'Miscellany 704', both in *The 'Miscellanies' 501–832*, Works of Jonathan Edwards, 18; ed. Ava Chamberlain (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 282–3 and 314–21.

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of their faithful response to God, Edwards posits God's gracious election 'antecedent to any foresight of good works, in a sense wherein he does not, in reprobation, decree the creature's eternal misery antecedent to any foresight of sin'.[23] Election is wholly gratuitous in that it is not dependent upon the foresight of good works in the object of election; rather, election is free and unconditioned. Edwards goes so far as to sever the necessary tie between election and the later decree that the elect will produce good works and faithfulness: 'It do[es]n't necessarily follow from the very nature of grace, or God's communicativeness of his own happiness, that there must be faith or good works. This is only a certain way of the arbitrary appointment of God's wisdom.'[24] Edwards is eager to refute any tinge of Arminianism, and to that end he affirms the freedom of God to do what God wants (even using the word 'arbitrary' in his exposition of this 'appointement' of God).

Edwards, in this text, would seem obviously to favour the infralapsarian position that God decrees both reprobation and election of *sinners*. After all, he explicitly claims that God 'does not, in reprobation, decree the eternal creature's eternal misery antecedent to any foresight of sin: because the being of sin is supposed in the first thing in order in the decree of reprobation'.[25]

But to see what Edwards is affirming, it must be acknowledged that doctrine does more than merely state the obvious. Rather, content finds its way into particular doctrinal structures to meet particular theological needs (concerning theodicy, assurance, trinitarian worship, etc.). In fact, most credal material has arisen from distinctly historical concerns to rule out particular heresies (i.e. Arian, binitarian and Marcionite). This use of doctrine might be termed the rhetoric of doctrine or function of doctrine.[26] To view doctrine this way is not to lapse into utilitarianism or pragmatism; rather, it is to acknowledge that certain doctrines do certain work in a certain context. The grammatical function of doctrine has been highlighted in the last twenty years by George Lindbeck and those associated with the postliberal 'Yale school'.[27] While doctrines certainly refer to reality, the context in which

[23] Jonathan Edwards, 'Miscellany 700', p. 283.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] For helpful discussion of the rhetorical use of doctrine (especially for the Reformed tradition), see Serene Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety* (Columbia Series in Reformed Theology; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995); and Ellen Charry, *By the Renewing of your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[27] George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984). For recent analysis of the so-called 'Yale school' and 'postliberal theology', see George Hunsinger, 'Postliberal theology', in Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.),

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reality presses in upon a particular theologian shapes doctrinal formulation and allows it to perform an ecclesial and intellectual function, warding off some particular heresy, idolatry or spiritual danger.[28]

In the case of the Reformed lapsarian debate, Turretin noted that the initial impulse towards warding off the Arminian–Pelagian ordering of the decrees led to a particular polemic which then clarified (and to a large degree prompted) Reformed orderings of the decrees. The debate later took in a wholly different purpose: defence of the doctrine of God from the claim that God's decree of the fall entailed a violation of God's goodness, justice and mercy. Thus debate over the order of the decrees moved from a response to the Arminian challenge to what might be called a broader Enlightenment challenge related to theodicy.

Edwards had a particular interest in both questions the Reformed lapsarian debate functioned to combat. On the one side, he wrote one of the most scathing attacks upon Arminianism in his *Freedom of Will*. On the other side, he possessed a keen interest in the doctrines of sin and (its epitome) hell throughout his pastoral and writing career (expressed in both his scholarly treatise *Original Sin* and famed hellfire sermons like 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God'). In these latter works he addressed the Enlightenment challenge regarding the goodness of God and the reality of evil head on. His engagement of the lapsarian debate can best be contextualised by viewing his engagement of these two impulses: warding off Arminians and defending the reality of sin and hell against the Enlightenment notion of justice.

In light of the questions Reformed decretal theology addressed, Edwards's endorsement of a seemingly standard infralapsarian position in 'Miscellany 700' can be seen as responding to the first challenge, rebuttal of the Arminian ordering of the decrees. Edwards makes this intent clear in that he cautions that 'God is far from having decreed damnation from a foresight of evil works *in the sense of the Arminians*: as if God in this decree did properly depend on the creature's sinful act'.[29] This polemical caution appears to contradict his earlier claims in that it claims that God did not decree the reprobation of sinners due to their sinning. Yet, it should be noted that Edwards is responding to a particular assertion about order, the Arminian notion of contingent

The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 42–57.

[28] Regarding the relationship between the function of doctrine and Lindbeck's grammatical depiction of doctrine, see Bruce Marshall, 'Aquinas as Postliberal Theologian', *The Thomist* 53 (1989), pp. 353–402; cf. Dennis Ockholm and Timothy Phillips (eds), *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), esp. part III.

[29] Jonathan Edwards, 'Miscellany 700', p. 283 (emphasis mine).

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election/reprobation owing to divine foresight of human responsibility. Edwards here refutes the Arminians doubly, by positing a difference between the election of saints and damnation of sinners and refusing even their definition of foreknowledge. At the very least, by noting the object of Edwards's polemical argument, we may wish to restrain our impulse to refer to him simply as infralapsarian; things may be more complex.

As attention is now turned to 'Miscellany 704' and other writings of Edwards (particularly the infamous 'Sinners' sermon), it will again be essential to assess Edwards's intent and the lapsarian debate by noting the issues he addresses and why he addresses them as he does. Here, he does not consistently side with the infralapsarians; rather, his treatment of the issue changes as his attentions turn from engagement of Arminian concerns to those regarding theodicy, sin and hell. His engagement of the issue becomes complex owing to differences in his polemical intentions.

'Miscellany 704' provides a much lengthier discussion of the lapsarian debate, nearly eight pages in the Yale critical edition (compared to the brief 'Miscellany 700'). Edwards here directly engages our question: the 'ways in which divine decrees may be said to be in this sense prior one to another'.[30] Upon noting the typical rejoinder that consequential ordering of decrees finds its home in human projection rather than the mind of God, Edwards then notes two ways in which one decree might be termed prior to another: (1) as the end or goal of that decree (e.g. the decree to eat ice cream is prior to the decision to drive to a creamery); (2) as the necessary condition of that decree (e.g. the existence of a creamery and a proper means of transportation to get there are necessary conditions prior to the decree to eat ice cream).[31] Obviously antecedence (the status of being a prior decree) can be attributed to both parts of a decretal series: eating ice cream is the intended goal and, therefore, prior to the existence of a creamery and proper transportation; but the existence of a creamery and proper transportation are the necessary conditions of eating ice cream and, therefore, prior to its decree. Edwards has clarified the tradition here by complicating it, noting two ways of defining antecedence.

Edwards then notes the way this antecedence doubly plays out with regard to reprobation. Most important is his insistence that both types of antecedence are valid and necessary for rational ordering: 'Not only must God be conceived of as having some end in consideration, before he determines the means in order to that end; but also must he be conceived of as having a consideration of the capableness or aptness of the means to obtain the

[30] Jonathan Edwards, 'Miscellany 704', p. 314.
[31] Ibid., p. 315.

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end, before he fixes on the means'.[32] God does not consider an end apart from potential means, though the end does attain a sense of primacy to the actual concrete form of the means. Edwards seems to advocate a scheme which likens the divine ordering to a back and forth consideration of end and means which attains gradual definition. Obviously he considers this ordering to be a human projection onto the actual, unified decision of God. But we must remember that he considers this ordering to be fitting and rational and does not refrain from optimistically positing the manner in which God goes about decreeing things. This ordering leads, however, to confusion when it comes to the tight categories of infralapsarian and supralapsarian orderings as they had been handed down in the Reformed lapsarian debate. He notes that 'the decree of reprobation may properly be said, in different respects, to be because of both of these [the sinner qua sinner and the divine intent to magnify God-self through just punishment of sin]'.[33] He affirms the conceptual necessity of sinfulness for the decree to reprobation; however, the decree to reprobation, while conditionally dependent upon the decree to create and permit sin, finds ultimate necessity in the will of God to magnify God-self in just punishment. Edwards seems to side with the infralapsarians regarding conceptual necessity, but with the supralapsarians regarding divine intent.

Edwards then explains the complexity of decretal ordering as one moves down the conceptual chain. For instance, questions of the application of the decree to reprobation or election find themselves worked out in both theoretical and pragmatic terms. First, they are teased out theoretically in communal terms and, second, in quite particular ways which will lead to individuals finding their place in one or the other camp. Edwards contends that the more consideration of decrees moves away from the primary decree to God's own self-glorification, the more complex the consequential ordering becomes.[34] The move towards particularity and further down the temporal chain involves more and more necessary grounds and intended grounds in each decree.[35] More specific decrees involve numerous contingencies which impose upon one another in great detail (as demonstrated now in microbiology). This move from the broad to the particular heavily affects the asymmetry that Edwards finds between election and reprobation. God's decrees cannot be discussed in simple, linear fashion. They are more like a plate of spaghetti, each crossing over several dozen others, than like a waffle,

[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid., p. 315.
[34] Ibid., pp. 316–20.
[35] Ibid., p. 317.

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each neatly separated and considered in itself. Planning the course of world history in all its detail is messy and complex.

In 'Miscellany 704' Edwards does not hold to the asymmetry of election and reprobation that he defended in 'Miscellany 700'. Here he defines the issue of asymmetry in terms of varying degrees of consequential complexity – the decree of election is equally basic to the glory of God and, therefore, equally complex in its consequential ordering as is the decree to reprobation.[36] 'Every distinct way of God's glorifying or exercising an attribute might as well be called a distinct attribute', and the 'vindictive justice of God is not to be considered as a mere or ultimate end, but as a means to an end'.[37] 'Indeed, the glorifying of God's mercy, as it presupposes the subject to be miserable, and the glorifying of his grace, as it presupposes the subject to be sinful, unworthy, and ill-deserving, are not to be conceived of as ultimate ends, but only certain ways or means.'[38] Both election and reprobation serve the greater and simple goal of God's self-glorification and are equally complex (requiring two grounds: one of purpose, the other of necessity).

Where does Edwards end up in 'Miscellany 704'? He seems to contradict his prior statements regarding the asymmetry of the decrees; he seems again to lean towards an infralapsarian ordering; and he manages to make things more complex by introducing this notion of a two-fold ordering. While many observers might be tempted simply to classify him as inconsistent, Edwards may be intentionally eluding our categories. His answers to two distinct theological challenges hint at a more nuanced and restrained purpose which requires broader considerations that he elsewhere undertakes (e.g. on hell and sin). Before clarifying his rhetorical purpose, the final paragraph of 'Miscellany 704' needs to be considered as evidence of his general restraint. Edwards notes in conclusion that 'there are no conditional decrees in this sense, viz. that decrees should depend on things, or conditions of them, that in this decree that depends on them as conditions, must be considered as themselves yet undecreed'.[39] Edwards here notes that decrees truly are simultaneous, truly are mutually prior (one as end, the other as means), truly are to be distinguished for our own rhetorical-polemical purposes (i.e. refuting Arminians). The two-way street of priority simply cannot be minimised or overlooked – things are nothing less than complex. Since Edwards in 'Miscellany 704' is not responding to Arminians, he now finds little need to engage the lapsarian debate head on and exercises epistemic caution.

[36] Ibid., pp. 316–17.
[37] Ibid., p. 316.
[38] Ibid., p. 317.
[39] Ibid., p. 321.

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Yet in so doing, Edwards takes the whole conversation to a new level – clarifying terms and demonstrating the complexity of decretal ordering in such a way as to find benefits and limitations in both the infralapsarian and supralapsarian schemes. To appreciate his accomplishment, one must note how he otherwise manages to avoid naming God as culpable for evil. In short, his clarifications regarding questions of theodicy and hell allow him to refrain from making sharp decisions in the lapsarian debate – the rhetorical necessity of such bluntness is calmed by his theodicy (contrary to Turretin). He does not need to boldly posit the way God thinks in order to avoid implicating God as unjust or evil. Rather, he meets the Enlightenment objection to God's goodness and the reality of evil by other doctrinal considerations tied more explicitly to sin and hell. To see how theodicy functions to aid his reticence in not defining the order of the decrees exactly, our attention must now be turned to his infamous sermon 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God' where his nuanced discussion of hell and evil will be demonstrated to remove the Enlightenment objection and, thereby, the necessity of an interaction with the lapsarian debate on its own terms.[40]

Edwards and alleviation of the need to clarify a lapsarian ordering

'Sinners' has long been noted as a hellfire and brimstone sermon, even the paradigmatic hellfire and brimstone sermon. Sadly, this has limited many students' perception of Edwards. But the broadening exposure to Edwards in recent scholarship should not disguise the fact that, though he is now many other things, Edwards was a hellfire and brimstone preacher.[41] Edwards describes the pangs of hell with exquisitely precise imagery, perhaps topped off by his statement that in hell 'if you cry to God to pity you, he will be so far from pitying you in your doleful case, or showing you the least regard or favor, that instead of that he'll only tread you under foot'.[42] Amidst this vivid depiction of lurid death-pangs which certainly demonstrates his historical distance from contemporary theology, Edwards

[40] Stephen Holmes rightly notes the tie between Edwards's doctrine of hell and his response to Locke's Enlightenment project (see his *God of Grace and God of Glory*, pp. 200–11).

[41] Norman Fiering notes that 'Edwards was the most famous fire and brimstone preacher in the eighteenth century, and possibly the most famous in the entire history of Western civilization': *Jonathan Edwards' Moral Thought and its British Context* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), p. 203.

[42] Jonathan Edwards, 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God', in *Sermons and Discourses, 1739–1742*, Works of Jonathan Edwards, 22; ed. Stout et al. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 414.

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also demonstrates the metaphysical distance between contemporary theology and himself exactly in his depiction of hell.

Contemporary theologians find themselves with two choices in engaging the severe regimes and evils of the last century: neo-Nietzschean embrace of violence (or 'will to power') as ontologically decisive or a privative view of evil which allows the assumption of 'original peace' prior to contingent violences.[43] Violence will either be natural and necessary or the very existence of violence will be posited as an absurd defeat. One such response glorifies dominance and Nietzsche's 'will to power', whereas the other simply remains silent in the face of horrendous evils. Both viewpoints play out in our world of mass-produced suffering – one provides a theological embrace of establishment, the other removes God from the arena by denying any substance to talk of evil.

Edwards embraces neither view. He posits a metaphysical primacy to goodness and order, thereby distancing himself from Nietzsche and his followers. In this respect his great affection for beauty as the category within which to view Being demonstrates his adherence to peace and order.[44] But Edwards also distances himself from Hart, Milbank and those who would merely cope with the pangs of hell by classifying pain as privation. For Edwards posits a positive function to hell: 'God hath had it on his heart to show to angels and men, both how excellent his love is, and also how terrible his wrath is.'[45] Edwards asserts an intentional purpose behind the existence of hell.[46]

First noting the intentions of earthly kings who desire to manifest their justice in punishing the wicked, Edwards notes how much greater is God's

[43] The two choices are portrayed, respectively, in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); and David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: the Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003). The bifurcation of 'ontological peace' and 'ontological violence' finds fruitful exposition in John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), part IV. Milbank also utilises the terminology of 'neo-Nietzschean' to depict those who follow Nietzsche in positing 'original violence' (ibid., pp. 278–9).

[44] See esp. Roland A. Delattre, *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards: An Essay in Aesthetics and Theological Ethics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968); Robert W. Jenson, *America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), ch. 2.; Louis J. Mitchell, *Jonathan Edwards and the Experience of Beauty*, Studies in Reformed Theology and History (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Theological Seminary, 2003), pp. 46–8.

[45] Edwards, 'Sinners', p. 414.

[46] Fiering notes that 'the justification for the very existence of a hell provides the essential framework for any discussion of its specific nature': *Jonathan Edwards' Moral Theology*, p. 212. Edwards's theological move simply inverts this relationship – demonstrating the justification of hell in its intention.

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desire to 'show his wrath, and magnify his awful majesty and mighty power in the extreme sufferings of his enemies'.[47] This is not mere payback or revenge. Rather, 'there will be something accomplished and brought to pass, that will be dreadful with a witness'.[48] Edwards has moved beyond privative or satisfaction views of hell and has denoted a positive, revelatory metaphysical depiction of evil at its most potent. Yet, Edwards maintains that God does not will evil qua evil.[49] God wills evil qua good.[50] Otherwise put, what humans will qua evil is primarily willed qua good by God.[51] Such a conclusion flows from the primacy of God's will as regards human willing. Edwards has offered a metaphysical depiction of evil at its most raw – hell in all its pain and sorrow – which redefines evil principally as good. God's revelation of justice and wrath are essentially good and only derivatively (and related to certain persons) considered evil.[52]

[47] Edwards, 'Sinners', p. 414.

[48] Ibid., p. 415.

[49] Jenson, *America's Theologian*, pp. 107–10.

[50] It is precisely this point which Stephen Holmes fails to acknowledge, namely, that God can will damnation as a good. Holmes takes Edwards's Lockean idealism to require the notion that all intelligent Christians will now understand good and evil; most intelligent Christians now do not see hell as a good; therefore, hell is not a good. Holmes has overstated the first two statements: (1) Edwards's idealism is quite a bit more chastened than that of Locke; and (2) some intelligent Christians do see hell as good. Holmes's critique also suffers from its conflation of trinitarianism with a certain interpretation of christocentricism, such that Holmes posits that only Christ suffers the pangs of hell for God's glory and the onlooking of the righteous. That such an image – the Son of God suffering hell – is any less horrible than Edwards's view of hell is questionable. That such a concept is the only way to be trinitarian (Holmes's contention) is thoroughly questionable. Cf. Holmes, *God of Grace and God of Glory*, pp. 215–40.

[51] The identification of what God wills qua good with what humans will qua evil in Edwards has led many scholars to posit that he does not refer to the same thing (and, therefore, that he does not account for the occurrence of the first sin). See Sam Storms, *Tragedy in Eden: Original Sin in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), p. 224; Clyde Holbrook, 'Jonathan Edwards Addresses Some "Modern Critics" of Original Sin', *Journal of Religion* 63 (1983), pp. 211–30. *Pace* John Kearney, 'Jonathan Edwards' Account of Adam's First Sin', *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 15 (1997), p. 128. The failing of these accounts lies in their inattention to Edwards's broader metaphysical wedding of Neoplatonic tendencies with Reformed theology. Jenson's acumen in joining metaphysical and narratival concerns is more profitable (see *America's Theologian*, esp. p. 110).

[52] In this respect Edwards has offered a positive construal of hell quite similar to that of Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa.IIae.19.1: 'Punishment is indeed a genuine sort of evil, since it does in fact result in the loss of some particular good; nevertheless in the last analysis it is good, namely in regard to its bearing upon the ultimate end.'

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Edwards offers a metaphysical theodicy in his redefinition of hell as primarily good. This doctrinal move allows him to refrain from engaging the lapsarian debate as a means to protect God's goodness. What applies most pointedly to God's involvement in hell applies broadly to each particular evil (including the first evil). While he utilised infralapsarian terms to ward off the Arminian challenge in early writings, he never engaged in wholesale adherence to the infralapsarian schema and actually circumvented the whole discussion by noting the twofold nature of consequential antecedence. Regardless of whether one finds any of Edwards's theology acceptable (by either distinctly Christian or modern standards), his rhetorical navigation through pastoral and cultural concerns of his day ought to be appreciated for its systemic rigour. Edwards's ability to note where a theologian ought to be silent – what questions need not be answered or even asked – demonstrates an unusual epistemic restraint.[53]

Reformed theology and doctrinal context

What might contemporary theological discourse gain from engagement with an old debate and Edwards's interaction with it?

At the second-order level, Reformed theologians in America might note the reason for Edwards's ability to refrain from making explicit judgement regarding the lapsarian debate. Too often theologians assume that confessional statements and their scholastically derived inferences arise in a vacuum, as if each issue necessarily requires an answer simply because the question has been raised. On the contrary, Edwards noted the need to deal with the problem of evil and God's culpability in the decrees of fall and reprobation (as well as with the pressing debate regarding Arminians in New England); however, he met that concern with a strong, positive view of evil, more specifically, with a strong, positive view of hell. Given his redefinition of hell as revealing God's goodness, Edwards did not have to worry about distancing God from the decrees which led to its existence. In short, Edwards did not need to engage the lapsarian debate on its assumed terms given his conceptual revisions elsewhere. As Reformed theologians in conservative denominations have a great propensity to treat confessional standards as propositional statements of enduring truth apart from any consideration of the particular questions being asked, the example of Edwards's restraint and its broader wisdom ought to challenge them to consider more complex ways to deal with issues of continuity amidst the tradition. Such would be a

[53] 'From the time of his conversion, Edwards considered it a symptom of faithlessness to be asking too many questions about God's eternal judgments' (Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards' Moral Thought*, p. 213).

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return to more traditional Reformed adherence to the contextual nature of all confession, thereby resulting in the existence of a multiplicity of confessional statements for the aid of guiding that act of ever-changing confession.[54]

This principle might be helpful in conversations regarding the cultural implications of supralapsarianism as proposed by Richard Mouw.[55] Mouw contends that supralapsarianism ought to lead to cultural disengagement given that it privileges church over creation in its ordering of election prior to creation.[56] Mouw's broader concern for cultural involvement is obviously important, especially so for Christians in America. The historical case that might be sustained by Mouw's thesis is beside our present point (though he has yet to demonstrate that supralapsarians tend towards withdrawal from society). The supralapsarian position need not deny the temporal value of civilisation-building prior to the *eschaton*. It is one thing to claim that God ultimately intends to be glorified in election unto eternal life and damnation. It is altogether another thing to state that such a claim necessitates antinomianism or cultural disengagement in the present day. The Reformed emphasis upon history has always emphasised the particular duties essential to covenant-keeping. Prior to the *eschaton*, cultural engagement has been commanded. No lapsarian ordering necessitates denying such a requirement.

While no lapsarian ordering necessarily denies the importance of cultural engagement, no lapsarian ordering is needed to uphold such involvement. We simply ought to note that Mouw's concern for cultural concern can be dealt with apart from consideration of the lapsarian debate. The doctrine of creation and the Reformed emphasis upon the moral law perform the rhetorical function which Mouw claims supralapsarians have surrendered. The divine decree to create a world and to order it communally by means of divinely revealed law provides ample basis for cultural engagement quite apart from consideration of a supposed ordering of the divine decrees. Quite apart from our concerns regarding the way God planned things, the Reformed emphasis upon the third use of the law and the 'creation mandate' necessitates cultural engagement. Christian engagement of culture has been articulated well beyond the Reformed tradition by recourse to doctrines of much-broader pedigree, creation and law.

Mouw makes the lapsarian debate do more work than it can sustain (or has ever been asked to sustain). Mouw can have cultural involvement without

[54] Karl Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, trans. Darrell L. Guder and Judith J. Guder, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology and History (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), p. 12.

[55] Mouw, 'Another Look at the Infra/Supralapsarian Debate'.

[56] Ibid., p. 146.

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resorting to an ordering of church and culture in the divine mind. In this, Edwards provides a fine example, for he surely took upon himself a public role which Mouw could greatly appreciate. Edwards's engagement of broader cultural issues is particularly evident in his service in Stockbridge which extended from cultural, political and institutional aid for Native Americans to evangelism more narrowly conceived. His late assumption of leadership at the College of New Jersey evidences a serious concern for education which goes well beyond the merely catechetical or sectarian. Edwards managed great cultural involvement without resorting to an infralapsarian ordering.

Edwards never explicitly acknowledged the epistemic troubles involved in consideration of consequential orderings of the divine decrees to create and redeem. To expect such apophaticism from such an epistemic optimist is unfair to Edwards as he lived in his own time and place. He did move beyond mere engagement with the lapsarian debate on its own terms, however. He changed the categories and circumvented the rhetorical need to participate. In so doing, he provides doctrinal reasons for later theologians to disengage from this debate. Such disengagement must, of course, be founded upon exegetical and epistemological demonstration of the incoherence of existing categories. That task of reassessment is well beyond the reaches of the present consideration. In such an undertaking, the example of Edwards ought to be noted and considered as an example of careful theological and pastoral-rhetorical complexity.

Edwards managed silence. He managed silence not by losing his metaphysical interest, Reformed roots, scholastic tendencies or epistemic optimism. Rather, he managed silence by providing a rhetorical substitute for the lapsarian debate: the furtherance of a positive view of hell. He demonstrates the rhetorical function of doctrine by allowing for silence in one debate by revision elsewhere. He also demonstrates the importance of reprobation, hell and divine intention in dealing with theodicy. In so doing, Edwards complicated and moved beyond the standard debate between the infralapsarians and supralapsarians.

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