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Self-Deception as a Theological Problem in Jonathan Edwards’s “Treatise Concerning Religious Affections”

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Like many great theologians, Jonathan Edwards was a polemicist. Although he kept extensive personal notebooks in which he developed his views concerning scripture interpretation and doctrinal theology, in most instances he did not publish these views without the catalyst afforded by theological controversy. Throughout the course of Edwards’s ministry Arminianism was his constant foe. In the 1730s he published a number of anti-Arminian sermons and actively opposed the ordination of Robert Breck, an Arminian sympathizer. He also viewed the revivals as falling within the scope of this anti-Arminian polemic. In Faithful Narrative (1737) he expressed concern over the spread of Arminianism in the Connecticut Valley and portrayed the revival as working directly against this tendency.1 Likewise in Some Thoughts (1743) he predicted that the activity of the Holy Spirit in the revivals would “entirely overthrow their scheme of religion” and suggested, “Now is a good time for Arminians to change their principles.”2 In the late 1740s on several occasions he recorded his intention to write “something particularly and largely on the Arminian controversy, in distinct discourses on the various points in dispute.”3 Although he was temporarily distracted from this proposed project by the communion controversy in Northampton, he began to carry it out soon after the move to Stockbridge, publishing Freedom of the Will in 1754.

During the colony-wide revivals of the early 1740s, however, Edwards perceived that he had to fight a war on two fronts. In the early stages of this revival Edwards defended the vital, affectional piety of the New Lights against Charles Chauncy’s quasi-Arminian rationalism. The second front opened up as the New Lights developed an extreme radical wing. Sensitive to the offense generated by the lay exhorting, itinerant preaching, censoriousness, and hyperemotionalism of the radicals, Edwards’s first line of attack was


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to argue that the extravagant appearance of the revival could be dis-
 distinguish from its essentially gracious core. As the behavior of the itinerants
and separates became more extreme, however, his posture changed. Al-
thought he never abandoned his conviction that the revival was the work of
God, it became increasingly difficult for him to describe as "excesses" what he
perceived to be a full-scale heretical movement, defined by antinomian
practices and enthusiastic utterances. To vindicate not only his own views
but revivalism itself, it became necessary for Edwards both to address the
rationalist critique and to differentiate experimental religion from the antino-
manism and enthusiasm of the radical New Lights.4

By engaging this new opponent Edwards's own theological posture ac-
quired an increased complexity and depth. It was not simply his narrow early
focus on Arminianism that had blinded him to the dangers of antinomianism;
his religious psychology was not sufficiently sophisticated to alert him to its
flaws. Confronting the extravagant behavior of the radical New Lights
helped Edwards's understanding of human nature to mature. In Distinguish-
ing Marks (1741), he confessed that a certain naiveté had initially affected his
assessment of experimental religion. "I once did not imagine," he stated,
"that the heart of man had been so unsearchable as I find it is. I am less
charitable, and less uncharitable than once I was. I find more things in
wicked men that may counterfeit, and make a fair shew of piety, and more
ways that the remaining corruption of the godly may make them appear like
carnal men, formalists and dead hypocrites, than once I knew of."5 Five years
later, in Religious Affections (1746) he again exclaimed: "How great . . . may
the resemblance be, as to all outward expressions and appearances, between
an hypocrite and a true saint!"6 Edwards had always known that the Chris-
tian community included members who made false claims to grace; usually
they professed obviously objectionable views that allowed them to be easily
identified as Arminians, Anglicans, or deists. But in his debate with the
radical New Lights, Edwards realized that experimental religion's very
dependence upon the affections promoted the production of counterfeit
Christians. To identify these false professors was a somewhat more difficult
task.

Following Thomas Shepard, Edwards called the form of self-deception
common among supporters of heart religion, 'evangelical hypocrisy.' It is

4. As William Breitenbach argues in a recent article, "From the early 1740s, when he
began to recognize that enthusiastic Antinomianism was as great a menace to true
religion as moralistic Arminianism, Edwards dedicated himself to a single, sustained
purpose—the defense of Calvinism against extremists of both sides": "Piety and
important to note, however, that Edwards's use of the term 'hypocrisy' and its use by his contemporaries differs from the way in which the term is commonly used today. In modern usage, hypocrites represent themselves to others in a way they know to be false; they deceive others but not themselves. Edwards's hypocrites, however, were not primarily defined by their self-conscious and willful intention to deceive others. Consider his characterization of legal and evangelical hypocrites: “There are two sorts of hypocrites: one that are deceived with their outward morality and external religion; many of which are professed Arminians, in the doctrine of justification: and the other, are those that are deceived with false discoveries and elevations; which often cry down works, and men’s own righteousness, and talk much of free grace; but at the same time make a righteousness of their discoveries, and of their humiliation, and exalt themselves to heaven with them.” Both sorts of hypocrite surely misled others with their false claims to grace, but the deception of others was subordinate to their own self-deception. Hypocrisy depended upon the incongruity between appearance and reality that was created by a claim to grace made in the absence of its corresponding inner gracious condition. Nevertheless, hypocrites were sincere in their professions; they represented themselves to the world in a way they sincerely believed to be accurate and appropriate. In modern usage 'sincerity' and 'hypocrisy' are opposite conditions, but for Edwards they could easily coexist. A sincere hypocrite was as possible as a sincere convert.

The point at which the revivalists were most vulnerable to the influences of self-deception was in their understanding of the means by which the justified sinner acquired assurance of salvation. Assurance was the condition that obtained when an individual sincerely believed that he or she had been justified and the belief was true; 'hypocrisy' was the term used when the belief was false. Evangelical hypocrites based their assurance upon an interpretation of evidence, but the evidence did not support the conclusion. They reasoned from false premises, and on the basis of this reasoning made false professions. Specifically, they misleadingly identified sudden, unusual, and overpowering emotional and physical experiences as signs of divine grace. These were the hypocrites Edwards described as “mak[ing] a righteousness of their discoveries, and of their humiliation,” but there is reason to believe that he himself had promoted just this sort of false assurance in his own ministry during the 1734-35 Connecticut Valley revivals. In Faithful Narrative, he boldly quantified the number of conversions that had occurred in his own parish of Northampton. In one eight-week interval between sacraments, he recorded that he accepted one hundred new members; the following eight

weeks brought in sixty more. During March and April of 1735, he calculated that conversions occurred “at the rate at least of four persons a day; or near thirty a week.” All together, he estimated, “more than 300 souls were savingly brought home to Christ in this town in the space of half a year.” However, in a revealing letter he wrote to Thomas Gillespie in 1751 Edwards admitted that these estimates had proved incorrect. Although he maintained that during 1734 and 1735, there had been “a very glorious work of God wrought in Northampton,” he stated that “undoubtedly many were deceived, and deceived others; and the number of true converts was not so great as was then imagined.”

In explaining the cause of this overestimate, Edwards primarily blamed the inhabitants of Northampton, who “had got [under the ministry of Solomon Stoddard] so established in certain wrong notions and ways in religion.” Specifically, his parishioners built their hopes of salvation upon the wrong evidence. He stated that they depended too heavily “on the particular shape and method of their first work; i.e., the first work of the Spirit of God on their hearts, in their conviction and conversion,” and “look[ed] but little at the abiding sense and temper of their hearts, and the course of their exercises, and trials of grace, for evidences of their good estate.” But this was clearly a retrospective judgment. Not until Religious Affections did Edwards explicitly argue that the best evidence of a genuine conversion was an “abiding sense” of God’s excellency and the ability to withstand “trials of grace.” In Faithful Narrative, on the other hand, he described in great detail and at some length the “shape and method” of the many conversion experiences of his parishioners and demonstrated little awareness of the importance of Christian practice as a sign of grace.

Edwards may have first recognized his error in the late 1730s when it became apparent that many of the presumed converts in Northampton had failed to persevere. However, the colony-wide revivals of the early 1740s displayed to him on a much larger stage the close relationship between experimental religion and evangelical hypocrisy. Although proclaiming the gospel of justification by faith alone, many of the itinerant evangelists inadvertently encouraged the deceptive means of assurance that Edwards was beginning to suspect had caused the failure of the earlier awakening in Northampton. Furthermore, many of the radical revivalists and separatists promoted not simply a hypocritical but a heretical conversion theology. The itinerant Andrew Croswell brought upon himself charges of antinomianism

11. Dwight, Life, p. 464. Edwards did accept some of the blame, stating that because of his “youth, and want of more judgment and experience” he “had no strength to oppose received notions, and established customs, and to testify boldly against some glaring false appearances, and counterfeits of religion, till it was too late” (p. 465).
by his doctrine of a "particular and assured Faith," which made certainty the essence of faith and eliminated the role of doubt in the religious life. The separatist minister Ebenezer Frothingham similarly maintained that doubt was antithetical to faith, reasoning that "if there is such a Person as a doubting humble Christian, I am sure you will find him in Hell, for there is no such Creature." In response to this proliferation of counterfeit piety among the supporters of heart religion, Edwards attempted to insulate experimental religion not only from antinomianism but also from evangelical hypocrisy by developing in Religious Affections a method of identifying gracious affections that had built-in protections against self-deception.

In New England Puritanism, distinguishing between genuine and counterfeit works of the Spirit occurred on three distinct levels: the individual, the ecclesiastical, and the social. On the individual level, which was the most fundamental, the distinction formed an integral part of the saint's lifelong regimen of meditation, introspection, and prayer that had assurance of salvation as its goal. A similar process of differentiation also took place on the ecclesiastical level wherein the system of closed communion required prospective church members to give convincing narrations of their religious experiences. Puritans were accustomed to using signs of grace on both these levels to distinguish between apparent and real conversions. During the debate over revivalism, however, this method was transferred from the microcosm of personal experience to the macrocosm of God's action in history as the colonists attempted to answer the "grand Question" concerning the awakening: "Whether it be a Work of God, and how far it is so."

In Edwards's revival treatises there was continual movement among these three levels of inquiry. Distinguishing Marks operated on both the individual and the social levels. Several of the signs Edwards listed in this treatise were applicable to individual human experience and action. For example, he included among the negative signs such things as emotional and physical effects and impressions on the imagination. The emphasis was on the social, however, because Edwards was primarily concerned to address the Old Light argument that the unorthodox practices of the radicals were themselves signs, indicating that the revival was not the work of God's Spirit. To counter this argument, Edwards gave his own interpretation of those signs—such as the occurrence of scandalous practices and the preaching of terror—that

were relevant primarily to the assessment of a broader social movement. Furthermore, in the application portion of the treatise he considered the signs in relation to the revival as a whole, and drew from them the conclusion that the "extraordinary influence that has lately appeared on the minds of the people abroad in this land . . . is undoubtedly, in the general, from the Spirit of God."15

In Religious Affections, direct assessment of the revival receded into the background. Although the ecclesiastical issue gained consideration for the first time in this work, the treatise was dominated by the individual dimension of the problem. Edwards's aim in this treatise was specifically to discriminate between gracious and counterfeit affections in order to establish a firm foundation for personal assurance. By confining the treatise to an examination of the affections, Edwards from the outset eliminated from the debate the Old Light critique of the Awakening. In its opening pages Edwards stated, "True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections."16 Radical New Lights would have had no difficulty agreeing with this definition; opponents of the revival, who tended to stress the role of reason in the religious life, would have disagreed. Nevertheless, this definition was the foundation upon which the entire argument of Religious Affections was built, for Edwards's quarrel was primarily with those who accepted his presuppositions and drew from them unacceptable conclusions.

On the individual level, discriminating between counterfeit and gracious affections occurred both in the third- and in the first-person contexts.17 In the third-person context, the epistemological problem concerned the observer's assessment of the quality of another person's religious experiences and affections. For Puritan ministers, who often counseled members of their congregations about the authenticity of their conversions, the third-person problem had a pressing pastoral importance. It acquired even greater urgency during the revivals as the New Lights adopted the practice of "censorious judging."18 Edwards never seriously entertained this solution to the third-person problem: "The true saints have not such a spirit of discerning, that they can certainly determine who are godly, and who are not. For though they know experimentally what true religion is, in the internal exercises of it; yet these are what they can neither feel, nor see, in the heart of

18. Ebenezer Frothingham defended this practice: "A Saint of God having Divine Light shining into the Understanding, and the Love of God (or pure Charity, which is the same), ruling in the soul, is . . . to know certainly that such and such Persons are true Converts, or the Saints of God." See Articles of Faith and Practice, p. 47.
another."19 In lieu of a "spirit of discerning" Edwards advocated the more empirical procedure of cataloging signs of grace; this position was not only orthodox but free of the epistemologically untenable notion of an intuitive perception of others' mental states.

In the first-person context, Edwards's conflict with the radicals became more acute. In this context there were again two possible options: a person could attempt to determine the validity of his or her own religious experiences and affections either through introspection or through observation of behavior. By maintaining that sanctification could function as evidence for justification, orthodox Puritan divines tended toward the latter view. In their analyses of the ordo salutis, orthodox divines identified justifying faith and faith of assurance as two distinct moments in the religious life. The sinner was justified by an immediate act of God's free grace; the saint acquired assurance, however, only through a lifetime of obedience to the moral law.20 Obedience produced assurance because the established effects of grace, such as good works and holy longings, could be employed as evidence of prior justification. To take such acts as signs of grace was, at the least, a sound example of reasoning from effect to cause and, at the most, compliance with the biblical injunction, "By their fruits ye shall know them." Absolute certainty, however, was a prerogative reserved only for God; true Christian assurance reflected what Edmund S. Morgan has called "faith in its proper imperfection."21

By collapsing the moments of justification and sanctification, antinomianism shifted the locus of assurance from observation of behavior to immediate experience. The direct encounter with the Holy Spirit in the conversion moment resulted, according to this interpretation, not only in justification but in assurance.22 The immediacy of grace allowed a transparent perception or intuition of one's election in Christ that produced a subjective certainty unavailable to those who argued on the basis of objective evidence. Where antinomianism ran to enthusiasm, such certainty was often reinforced by a direct revelation from God announcing to the redeemed sinner that he or she had been saved. Antinomianism, therefore, equated justifying faith with faith of assurance and confounded belief with the reflex act of believing that

22. For example, Crosswell stated that "true Faith is of a particular Nature, whereby every one believes Christ to be his Saviour, and hath just so much Assurance as he hath Faith," and asserted that true Christians received "Knowledge of [their] good Estate, partly, and principally by the Spirit of Adoption shining immediately into [their] Hearts": What is Christ to me, pp. 31, 32.
one believes. As a consequence, doubt was viewed as a sign of the very absence of faith and the person's continuation in a legal condition.

Edwards's discussion of personal assurance in *Religious Affections* decisively distinguished his view of affectional religion from that of the radical revivalists. In the twelfth certain sign he asserted that sanctification evidenced justification, as orthodox Puritans traditionally had done in order to counteract a tendency toward antinomianism. Nevertheless, Edwards emphasized this position only as the increasing extremism of the New Lights displayed to him the difficulties inherent in using immediate experience as the grounds of assurance. Experimental religion lent itself to an interpretation of assurance based upon immediate experience. Such a view was encouraged by the rhetorical use of terror in preaching and the affectional analysis of religion common among the revivalists. The extreme terrors and longings preceding conversion, combined with an emotional and sudden—even cataclysmic—depiction of conversion itself, tended to overshadow the more calm and reflective evidence of good works. Furthermore, in the first-person context, introspection appeared to be an epistemologically reasonable means of distinguishing between true and false affections. Because of the individual's privileged access to his or her own emotions, intentions and beliefs, it was plausible to maintain that knowledge of the quality of the affections could be acquired through introspection. Only if this access was in some way flawed would it be necessary to question introspection as the ground of certainty. The unorthodox doctrine and disorderly practice of the radical revivalists allowed Edwards to perceive this flaw, and he revised his views concerning the means of assurance to accommodate it.

The flaw was sin, and its consequence was self-deception. Its effects were clearly displayed by the radicals' failure to maintain a "properly imperfect" faith. "Such an overbearing, high-handed and violent sort of confidence as this," Edwards stated, "so affecting to declare itself with a most glaring show, in the sight of men, which is to be seen in many, has not the countenance of a true Christian assurance: it savors more of the spirit of the Pharisees, who never doubted but that they were saints." If made with the proper humility, a profession of assurance was not a sign of hypocrisy, but neither was it a positive indication that the affections were gracious or that justification had actually occurred. The antinomian view of assurance rested not only on theological error but on psychological misunderstanding, for it failed to

25. In the eleventh uncertain sign Edwards argued that assurance itself was an uncertain sign of grace. He also insisted that faith should not be equated with assurance: "The Scripture represents faith, as that by which men are brought into a good estate; and therefore it can't be the same thing, as believing that they are already in a good estate." See Edwards, *Religious Affections*, p. 178.
recognize the nearly limitless potential of human nature for self-deception. “If we do but consider what the hearts of natural men are, what principles they are under the dominion of, what blindness and deceit, what self-flattery, self-exaltation and self-confidence reigns there, we need not at all wonder,” stated Edwards, “that the radicals’ assurance is “as high and strong as mountains, and as violent as a tempest.”26 In *Religious Affections*, he supported not simply the orthodox position on the means of assurance but the position that reflected an awareness of the continuing sinfulness and duplicity of the individual even under grace. He rejected immediate experience and adopted Christian practice because it was less exposed to the effects of self-deception.

Without advocating an antinomian view of assurance, experimental religion itself was susceptible to a moderate form of hypocrisy that Edwards called “living on experiences.” This more common type of self-deception was sustained by a policy of selective attention. Looking at themselves through the lens of their self-love, these evangelical hypocrites attended only to moments of high affection and neglected aspects of their “conversation” that could jeopardize their assurance. In particular, they used as a foundation for assurance a sequence of unusually intense religious experiences, which had occurred at some time in the past. Having “once obtained that which they call their conversion . . . they act as though they thought their work was done: they live upon their first work, or some high experiences that are past; and there is an end to their crying, and striving after God and grace.”27 According to Edwards, a truly gracious assurance could never be grounded on the identification of a particular conversion moment. He even depicted the apostle Paul, whose overpowering and sudden conversion functions within the Christian tradition as the paradigmatic religious experience, as not depending for his assurance upon his memory of the Damascus road. On the contrary, “Paul sought assurance chiefly this way, even by forgetting the things that were behind, and reaching forth unto those things that were before, pressing towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”28

Edwards firmly believed that justification was an instantaneous act that qualitatively transformed the faculties; he did not believe, however, that a person necessarily experienced conversion as an instantaneous transformation. By his analysis of the twelve uncertain signs of grace in *Religious Affections*, Edwards demonstrated that no moment of high religious affection could ever be identified with certainty as a conversion moment. These twelve phenomena were common features of experimental religion; however, Edwards

27. Ibid., p. 380.
argued that they "are no signs one way or the other, either that affections are such as true religion consists in, or that they are otherwise." 29 As a foundation for assurance, they were able to support only a counterfeit conviction of grace. That the affections, for example, were raised very high and had great effects on the body, that they occurred in various kinds all in the expected order, and inclined their subjects to spend much time in religion, praising and glorifying God, that they appeared to have been produced by an external cause and made persons exceedingly confident that what they experienced was divine—none of these characteristics demonstrated either the presence or the absence of saving grace in the heart. "Nothing hinders," wrote Edwards, "but that all these things may meet together in men, and yet they be without a spark of grace in their hearts. . . . [T]here may be all these things, and yet there be nothing more than the common influences of the Spirit of God, joined with the delusions of Satan, and the wicked and deceitful heart." 30

Gracious affections were, by definition, those that were produced by grace; counterfeit affections were those that, while having a gracious appearance, were the effects of natural causes. The twelve uncertain signs of grace could not function as a foundation for assurance because they were insufficient by themselves to indicate the nature of their cause. 31 Each of these phenomena could be equally and adequately explained by a multiplicity of possible causes. At worst they were caused by the Devil, at best by saving grace; but their occurrence might also be explained by the operation of common grace, the imagination or some other natural human faculty. They were indeterminate signs precisely because they were not necessarily related to any particular cause. Therefore, they were not reliable indicators of the presence of gracious affections in the heart. Edwards displayed his sympathy for experimental religion by permitting these phenomena a legitimate role in the religious life. Intense emotions that strongly affect the body, voices, visions, and all manner of imaginary ideas could enhance the religious life, but only as epiphenomenal attributes. They could attend gracious affections as byproducts of an emotionally heightened state; the hypocrite's error, however, was to use them as evidence of conversion and as the foundation for assurance.

If Edwards is vulnerable at any point to the charge that he uses immediate experience as a means to discriminate between counterfeit and gracious affections, it is in his concept of the "new spiritual sense." Edwards carefully described the new spiritual sense to avoid all potentially antinomian interpre-

29. Ibid., p. 127.
30. Ibid., pp. 182–183.
tations. Antinomian perfectionists maintained that justifying grace was bestowed upon the sinner with such immediacy that it circumvented the use of all secondary means, both subjectively by overwhelming the faculties and objectively by abandoning the ordinances. Corrupt human nature was denied all participation in regeneration. The locus of the personality was transferred to the indwelling Spirit, and the creature acquired new faculties of understanding and will that communicated a sinless perfection to all future acts. Edwards, however, affirmed the orthodox view of regeneration by insisting that the new spiritual sense was neither a “new faculty of understanding” nor a “new faculty of will,” but a “new foundation laid in the nature of the soul, for a new kind of exercises of the same faculty of understanding,” and “for a new kind of exercises of the same faculty of will.” Justifying grace renovated human nature by means of infused habits and created graces. As these habits grew in strength, they gradually rooted out the deeply entrenched depravity, transforming not only the internal faculties but also external behavior. Therefore, perfection existed not as a present reality but as the goal of the religious life realized only in the life to come.

By means of this new spiritual sense, grace restored to the saint that capacity—which was withdrawn from humankind at the Fall—to perceive the moral excellency of divine things. This capacity distinguished, in an a priori manner, the saint from the hypocrite and truly gracious affections from their many counterfeits. However, Edwards often appeared to adopt a quasi-antinomian view of assurance by implying that the perception of moral excellency could function not only as an a priori criterion for justification but as an experiential foundation for certainty. For example, he stated that “in those gracious exercises and affections which are wrought in the minds of the

32. William Stoever states that Edwards’s “notion of the ‘new spiritual sense’ . . . was a restatement, in terms of Lockeian empiricism rather than scholastic metaphysics, of Reformed orthodoxy’s insistence that grace qualitatively enhances the power of the human faculties, without destroying their nature.” See “A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven”: Covenant Theology and Antinomianism in Early Massachusetts (Middletown, Conn., 1978), p. 190.


35. Edwards defined truly gracious affections as those produced by a perception of moral excellency: “Those affections that are truly holy, are primarily founded on the loveliness of the moral excellency of divine things. Or . . . a love to divine things for the beauty and sweetness of their moral excellency, is the first beginning and spring of all holy affections.” See Edwards, Religious Affections, pp. 253–254.
saints, through the saving influences of the Spirit of God, there is a new inward perception or sensation of their minds. . . . [S]omething entirely new is felt, or perceived, or thought; . . . or there is what some metaphysicians call a new simple idea."36 This celebrated comparison of the new spiritual sense to the perception of a “new simple idea” supports the view that, according to Edwards, the saint’s assurance of salvation is grounded in the clarity and distinctness of a new perception or sensation.37 Edwards’s use of the metaphors of taste and relish lends credence to this interpretation. As a form of experiential knowledge, spiritual understanding is analogous to that knowledge of honey derived from the actual tasting of it. Such knowledge is private, immediate, and essentially incomunicable to those excluded from the experience. Introspection, not observation of behavior, is the appropriate means of access.

The problem with this interpretation of the new spiritual sense is that it fails to recognize the continuing presence of sin in the saint even after justification. Edwards used metaphors of perception and sensation to describe not only the operation of the new spiritual sense but also the way in which its operation was obscured by sin. According to Edwards, there was a “twofold defect” that hindered the saint from an intuitive perception of grace. First, prior to death, grace existed in such small degree and was mingled with so much corruption that it “cannot be clearly and certainly discerned and distinguished.”38 Second, sin not only obscured the object but enfeebled the sight. “Sin,” stated Edwards, “is like some distempers of the eyes, that make things to appear of different colors from those which properly belong to them, and like many other distempers, that put the mouth out of taste, so as to disenable from distinguishing good and wholesome food from bad, but everything tastes bitter.”39 Because sin distorted the vision, the saint did not achieve a transparent perception of the moral excellency of divine things that “opens a new world to its view.”40 Because sin “put the mouth out of taste,” the saint did not experience redemption with the immediacy of the taste of honey and could not maintain an assurance unclouded by doubt. It is, therefore, not far wrong to characterize Edwards as a theoretical antinomian and a practical Calvinist. However, the doctrinal

36. Ibid., p. 205.
37. This is a common modern interpretation of Edwards. For example, Terrence Erdt states that the sense of the heart “constitutes unique knowledge of God’s mercy and of one’s own election. But because of its basis in inward feeling, it is knowledge known experimentally, through individual experience.” See Jonathan Edwards: Art and the Sense of the Heart (Amherst, Mass., 1980), pp. 11–12.
39. Ibid., p. 195.
40. Ibid., p. 273.
errors and practical disorders of the radical New Lights checked whatever antinomian impulses were latent in his theology.\textsuperscript{41}

According to Edwards, Christian practice was the locus of assurance because, in comparison with immediate experience, it was less liable to produce counterfeit convictions of grace. Christian practice resulted in a more accurate assessment of one's spiritual estate because it directed the individual to attend to events that had true evidential value. Edwards identified these epistemologically significant moments as "trials of faith." Trials, according to Edwards, were an integral part of the Christian life because they were the vehicle for the acquisition of self-knowledge. For example, in a discussion of God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, Edwards observed that this trial of the patriarch's faith was intended to reveal the strength and sincerity of his faith not to God but to Abraham himself. "[I]n this practical exercise of Abraham's grace under this trial," stated Edwards, "was a clearer evidence of the truth of his grace, than ever was before; and the greatest evidence to Abraham's conscience; because God himself gives it to Abraham as such . . . as what might be the greatest evidence to his conscience, of his being upright in the sight of his Judge."\textsuperscript{42} Similarly, the Israelites' years of wandering in the wilderness and their conflicts with the Canaanites were trials designed "to discover them to themselves, that they might know what was in their own hearts."\textsuperscript{43}

Edwards defined trials of faith as "those things that occur, and that a professor meets with in his course, that do especially render his continuance in his duty, and faithfulness to God, difficult to nature."\textsuperscript{44} Such situations forced the individual to choose between the love of God and the love of self. Because the result of this choice revealed the true bias and inclination of the will, Edwards argued that trials were "the proper experiment of the truth and power of our godliness."\textsuperscript{45} In this context, Edwards used the term "experiment" in its scientific sense: temptations and trials generated evidence that either confirmed or contradicted an initial hypothesis that justification had occurred. "This is properly Christian experience," wrote Edwards, "wherein the saints have opportunity to see, by actual experience and trial, whether they

\textsuperscript{41} In comparing Edwards and Benjamin Franklin, William Breitenbach states, "These twice-born men were both once-burned. . . . [B]oth men realized that they had been duped because they themselves had succumbed to the temptations of antinomianism. Both had eagerly seized on the bright promises of an easy and effortless redemption." See "Religious Affections and Religious Affectations: Antinomianism and Hypocrisy in the Writings of Franklin and Edwards," \textit{Benjamin Franklin, Jonathan Edwards, and the Representation of American Culture}, eds. Barbara B. Oberg and Harry S. Stout (New York, 1993), p. 20.

\textsuperscript{42} Edwards, \textit{Religious Affections}, p. 432; emphasis added.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., p. 431.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., p. 389.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., p. 452.
have a heart to do the will of God, and to forsake other things for Christ, or no. As that is called experimental philosophy, which brings opinions and notions to the test of fact; so is that properly called experimental religion, which brings religious affections and intentions, to the like test."46 Neither great emotional and physical effects, nor great convictions of conscience and humiliations before God, but encounters such as these were the essence of experimental religion, for only they could support a truly gracious assurance of salvation.

Nevertheless, assurance based upon Christian practice was not immune from the effects of self-deception. Although only saints could perform genuine acts of obedience, even they at times experienced trials in which sin provoked a selfish choice. These failed trials caused assurance to fluctuate in strength and degree and created the suspicion of self-deception. Furthermore, unredeemed sinners, whose actions were caused by self-interested motives, could nevertheless appear to withstand trials of faith. Like highly affecting emotional experiences, these counterfeit acts of obedience could be used as the foundation for a hypocritical assurance. That which truly distinguished the practice of the saint from that of the hypocrite was the nature of the volition motivating that practice. "The act of the soul," Edwards asserted, "and the exercise of grace, that is exerted in the performance of a good work, is the good work itself, so far as the soul is concerned in it."47 To reduce the potential for self-deception, therefore, people must attend not simply to their behavior in moments of trial but also to their motives.

Focusing on motives increased accuracy, but it did not, in and of itself, eliminate the problem of hypocrisy. Because people did not have intuitive access to their own mental states, they could not have knowledge of their intentions and acts of will that was free from the influences of self-deception. Introspection being distorted by sin and self-love, there could be no certainty that any one act was caused by a genuine love to God. This lack of certainty meant that a few apparently successful trials of faith were as weak and potentially self-deceptive evidence for assurance as high affections. However, according to Edwards, a gracious disposition or habit motivated each successful trial of faith. "Godliness in the heart," wrote Edwards, "has as direct a relation to practice, as a fountain has to a stream, ... or as a habit or principle of action has to action: for 'tis the very nature and notion of grace, that, 'tis a principle of holy action or practice."48 Like natural habits or dispositions, grace inclined a person to behave in a consistent and somewhat predictable fashion in specific situations; it was, therefore, valid to infer, from observation of behavior, the existence of the underlying habit. But to be reliable, the

46. Ibid., p. 452.
47. Ibid., p. 423.
48. Ibid., p. 398.
inference could not be based upon the observation of a single act or limited group of actions. Only if a person regularly engaged in a specific pattern of behavior over time was it legitimate to presume the operation of an internal habit or disposition. Just as a scientific hypothesis is confirmed not by one isolated test, but by the aggregate results of repeated experimentation, this accumulation of evidence eventually pointed to a recognizable pattern of behavior and a fixed habit, which in turn served as the ground for self-assessment. Therefore, Christian practice was a necessary but not sufficient condition for assurance. Only a repeated pattern of successful trials of faith formed a stronger evidential base than any isolated act or experience. *Perseverance* was finally the only adequate foundation for a truly gracious assurance of salvation.49

In the preface to *Religious Affections* Edwards stated that identifying the distinguishing marks of a true saint was "a subject on which my mind has been peculiarly intent, ever since I first entered on the study of divinity."50 Integral to this inquiry and shaping its outcome was Edwards's experience with experimental religion during both the Connecticut Valley revivals of 1734–1735 and the colony-wide revivals of the early 1740s. Believing that this new religiosity counteracted the growing popularity of Arminianism in New England, at first he vigorously defended it against the rationalist criticisms of the Old Lights. But as the revivals progressed and the practices of the New Lights became more extreme, Edwards realized that he had failed to perceive the close connection between emotional religious experience and self-deception. Because of its emphasis upon the affections, experimental religion inadvertently encouraged not only antinomianism and enthusiasm but also a more moderate form of hypocrisy that resulted when assurance was grounded on immediate experience.

Edwards responded to this increased appreciation of human nature's propensity for self-deception by constructing an evangelical Calvinist theology that had built-in safeguards against hypocrisy. In *Religious Affections*, therefore, he both insisted upon the centrality of the affections in the religious life and rejected immediate experience as a solution to the epistemological problem concerning the nature and means of assurance. To minimize the potential for self-deception, he advocated a life of persevering Christian practice as the only sound foundation on which to build a hope of salvation.

49. "When a natural man denies his lust, and lives a strict, religious life, and seems humble, painful and earnest in religion, 'tis not natural, 'tis all force against nature; as when a stone is violently thrown upwards; but that force will be gradually spent; yet nature will remain in its full strength, and so prevails again, and the stone returns downwards. . . . But if the old nature be indeed mortified, and a new and heavenly nature infused; then may it well be expected, that men will walk in newness of life, and continue to do so to the end of their days." Edwards, *Religious Affections*, p. 396.
Traditionally, Puritan theologians had maintained that sanctification was the most reliable evidence for justification; as a consequence, to live the Christian life required constant vigilance and frequent worry about hypocrisy. By emphasizing Christian practice, Edwards was not simply recommending a return to this traditional pattern of piety; he was attempting to combine the new revivalism with the older vigilance. Edwards famously maintained in *Religious Affections* that if there is “light without heat . . . there can be nothing divine in that light.” More central to his argument, however, was the claim, “experience, that is without practice . . . is worse than nothing.”51 The former synthesis defined the nature of spiritual knowledge, but it was only the latter that allowed the saint peacefully to prepare for death.

51. Ibid., pp. 120, 452.