



PURPOSE

Jonathan Edward's theological psychology is a healthy antidote to various harmful effects of the wrong kind of preoccupation with self. In Edward's thought, God's self-love trumps all other loves and lays the groundwork for evaluating their worth. Indeed, to his way of thinking, God's self-love is the single most powerful operating principle in the universe. In one of his works, Edwards expounds how God's glorification of himself is the ultimate purpose of everything.

At the same time, Edwards saw that God had a deep concern for human well-being. God's self-love takes into His Trinitarian embrace humanity and his creation in redemptive grace and in common grace, which reveals itself very often in the practical results of human self-love. With this as a backdrop, Edwards offered four types of love that form the basis of **purpose** for us as individuals.

1. **Natural, Simple self-love.** Edwards elaborates, "Self-love, taken in the most extensive sense,...is only a capacity for enjoying and delighting in anything...A desire and delight in God's good can't be superior to our love to delight in general...a desire of and delight in God's good is love to God; and love to delight is self-love. So putting love for God and love for self at odds, as the mystical "pure love" advocates did, was creating a false dilemma. In effect, because Edwards saw in God a model for good human behavior, and because God is happily and righteously self-interested, humans can be also. The problem, he acknowledged, was our fallen and depraved sinful nature.
2. **Social Self-love.** In Edward's analysis, compounded self-love is natural self-love expanding out beyond its own restricted sphere to include other beings connected somehow with the self. In other words, by association with oneself other people also become objects of affection and benevolence

Needless to say, Edwards perceived a problem in a hypothetical world of universal brotherhood without God at the center of it. Even such a world of universal peace, happiness, and harmony would be horribly sinful without God at the hub. To put it in his words, "If there could be an instinct or other cause [like self-love] determining a person to benevolence towards the whole world of mankind ...exclusive of...love to God...[and] supreme regard to him...it cannot be of the nature of true virtue."

3. **Sinful Self-love:** This brings us to the heart of analysis of Edward's view of human self-love. Not only was self-love lacking in virtue due to sin, it had an inevitable tendency toward evil. Edwards explains: "*Mere self-love, if it be the sole governing principle in the heart and without restraint, will dispose one to delight in another's misery, because self-love seeks its own comparative happiness...Self-love will delight in cruelty and putting others to pain, because it appears to it as an exercise of power...if there be only self-love that bears rule, it will be contented with nothing short of the throne of God.*" *If men do great things and suffer great things merely out of self-love, that is but to offer to themselves which is due to God, so making an idol of themselves.*

Of greatest concern to Edwards was the subtle danger of counterfeit religious experience arising from some form of self-love disguising itself as piety. The emotional attachment of the hypocrite springs from self-love and the thought that God is so interested in him: Again, listen to Edwards: "*The hypocrite rejoices in himself, self being the first foundation of his joy: the true saint rejoices in God. The dependence of the affection of hypocrites is in a contrary order: they first rejoice...that they are made so much of by God; and then on that ground, He seems so lovely to them.*"

Their thinking is utilitarian: What can God do for me? If he can meet my felt needs, I will make room for Him. If not, then God becomes irrelevant. In the realm of human relationships, if we get the impression we are only being used by someone who shows no real interest in who we are or what

we care about, then we naturally conclude that this person does not really love us. The same would be true for God. Perhaps one of the most dangerous things about the hypocrite is that God is supposed to conform to their imagination about Him.

4. **Sanctified Self-Love and Godly Self-Respect.** Interestingly enough, Edwards viewed pride and self-love alike – as neutral concepts. When pride turned to self-conceit it became a problem. He saw nothing evil in the pursuit of greater individual excellence or achievement. Edwards went beyond the bounds of simplistic and conventional thinking. He set the stage for describing a kind of godly self-respect. Edward’s solution to the problem of sinful self-love was not to eliminate self-love. He saw the need to have it supernaturally transformed into a spiritual hunger for the glory of God. This concept seems to echo the experience of the elders who lay down their crowns before God in Scripture (Revelation 4:10). In the Kingdom of God one can both be a King and a humble subject at the same time.

Conclusion: The subtlety, complexity, and sophistication of Edward’s thinking about self-love and self-esteem are a wholesome remedy to the simplistic thinking in much of current secular and religious literature. Edwards shows us the necessity of making careful distinctions. The dangers of a simplistic dichotomy between self-love and self-hatred are manifold. Edwards points us away from the current teachings on self-esteem and instead advocates humbling oneself before God as a sinner, which he believed was a precondition for the experience of godly self-respect. He then points us to the fact that it is only in relationship to others, **especially God**, that self finds its proper definition and worth. Herein lays our greatest purpose.