

Immortality of the Soul

Entry for
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Edwards is committed to the rejection of materialist ontology. Edwards assumes two philosophical theses pertaining to human or soulish immortality, namely, immaterialism (the metaphysical notion that all that exists are immaterial substances, yet for Edwards there is only one *true* Substance—God), and metaphysical idealism (the philosophical thesis that all that exists are minds and their ideas—including physical things). On the surface, one might argue that Edwards is committed to anthropological dualism, and this would be true in the sense that he loosely holds that there are souls and bodies. Having said this, Edwards affirms that persons are primarily at their core souls by which he means pure minds. Edwards believes bodies are properties dependent upon minds given his commitment to idealist immaterialism, or so I am assuming. Edwards speaks of souls as more substantial than bodies and souls are more closely related to God in the hierarchy of God's creation. Let's consider what Edwards actually says about the nature of the soul in terms of immortality.

Edwards is committed to the notion of a Divinely communicative event. By this, Edwards takes it that all of creation is one Divine conscious event (in keeping with his commitment to Divine idealism). In this way he takes it that the end of creation is the communication of God's own glory, which God communicates first and foremost to human minds (as his image Bearers). God is the only true substance (i.e., absolute substance) that bears the property of eternity or immortality, but in the act of creation he communicates his nature to his image bearers.

Edwards confirms the doctrine of the immortality of the soul in keeping with a long and robust tradition found within Reformed orthodoxy. He shows this doctrine to be an essential article of the faith taught in the Old and New Testaments (WJE 27; "Controversies" *Notebook*). Edwards seems to believe that this follows from the soul's indivisibility (WJE 6:63-64). Added to this, Edwards affirms that souls will receive reward and punishment in the afterlife requiring a substantial persistence hence some variety of immortality (see *Typological Writings* and *The Miscellanies*). In other places, Edwards discusses the soul's modal possibility of existing disembodied. He means to say that souls can persist without bodies. Souls exist in heaven in a disembodied state. Edwards explains that God's glory is communicated to human minds. As God communicates his own glory to human minds he communicates his nature to human minds throughout eternity—the doctrine of immortality (WJE 8:534).

In *The Mind*, we find a detailed argument given by Edwards for the immortality of the soul. Edwards argues for the necessity of the immortality of the soul in order to make

coherent sense of God's creation of the whole world. There would be no rationale for God to eternally snuff conscious beings out of existence because of his purpose in creating humans at creation as the recipients of God's glory. Human creatures, also referred to as intelligent or conscious creatures, are God's agents to express God's immortality to all lower creatures. In the end, a short existence would be both unreasonable for humans as well as lower creatures in God's creative event. What is the value in that, Edwards claims?

Bibliography:

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Oliver Crisp, *Jonathan Edwards on God and Creation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), chapter 8.

McClymond and McDermot, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), chapter 35.