Oberlin Perfectionism and Its Edwardsean Origins

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Oberlin Perfectionism and Its Edwardsean Origins

Abstract
An impression has very generally prevailed," wrote James Harris Fairchild toward the end of his twenty-three-year presidency of Oberlin College, "that the theological views unleashed at Oberlin College by the late Rev. Charles Grandison Finney & his Associates involves a considerable departure from the accepted orthodox faith." It was an impression that Fairchild believed to be inaccurate, and he would probably be horrified to discover a century later that the prevailing impression the "Oberlin Theology" has made on historians of the nineteenth-century United States continues to be one in which Oberlin stands for almost all the progressive and enthusiastic unorthodoxies of the Age of Jackson, from Sylvester Graham's crackers to moral perfectionism. But Fairchild, who was one of Finney's earliest students in the original Oberlin Collegiate Institute and who succeeded Finney as professor of moral philosophy and theology in 1858 and then as president of Oberlin College in 1866, was certain that he discerned a far different genealogy for Oberlin, one which ran back not to the age of Jackson but to the age of Jonathan Edwards. "The ethical Philosophy inculcated by Mr. Finney & his associates of later times is that of the elder Edwards," Fairchild repeatedly insisted, and the Oberlin Theology, far from being "original," was nothing less than "the theory ... presented by various authors, especially by President Edwards ... and by his pupil and friend Samuel Hopkins." [excerpt]

Keywords
Oberlin College, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finney, Oberlin Theology, morality, perfectionism

Disciplines
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This is a surprising claim, since the prevailing currents of interpretation of both Finney and Edwards meet more for the purposes of contrast than comparison, and also because the central doctrine of the Oberlin Theology—the attainability of moral perfection—seems too optimistic, too shallow, and above all too Pelagian to link with the most imposing apologist for Calvinism and human depravity in United States intellectual history. But Fairchild’s claims are not easy to dismiss, if only because hardly anyone was in a better position to make an assessment of the intellectual dynamic of the Oberliners. Contrary to the conventional characterization of perfectionism at Oberlin as an enthusiastic aberration of the Jacksonian persuasion, Finney—along with his Oberlin co-adjudors, Asa Mahan, Henry and John P. Cowles, John Morgan, James Armstrong Thome, and Fairchild—owed a complex but clear reliance on Edwards and the particular evolution of Edwardsian theology known as the New Divinity, while Oberlin perfectionism was predicated in large measure on the Oberliners’ explication of the famous natural ability/moral inability dichotomy in Edwards’s great treatise *Freedom of the Will* and on the famous statement of “disinterested benevolence” articulated by Hopkins and the New Divinity. It was within this outline that Fairchild saw Oberlin as “Calvinistic in doctrine, after the New England type,” and not Arminian, Jacksonian, or Wesleyan; and it was within that Edwardsian outline that Oberlin perfectionism represented a recoil from, rather than an embrace of, the democratized and sentimentalized piety of the nineteenth century.

Perfectionism in English-speaking Christian theology is most often associated with John Wesley and Methodism, and later on, with what became known in American religious history as the “holiness movement.” However, the term *perfection*, even in Wesley’s hands, was a rather loosefitting garment—Wesley actually used a bewildering cluster of synonyms, ranging from entire sanctification through perfect love to the second blessing—thrown over a collection of ideas which ranged from an instantaneous moment of divine sanctification of the soul to a gradual growth in stages of perfect love, and drawn from a conflicting array of sources that included both High-Church Non-Jurors and Moravian pietists. Tracking down these disparities has drawn historical attention away from the underlying motive for Wesley’s adoption of perfectionism, and that was the need, in an age of Enlightenment where the acceptance of truth depended on how well it could be proven by experience and demonstration, to make Christianity as empirically visible as any Lockean primary quality. “Faith implies both the perceptive faculty itself and the act of perceiving God and the things of God,” Wesley insisted, employing a vocabulary of sensationalism which (as Frederick Dreyer and Richard Brantley have shown) owes more than a little to Locke. “It implies both a supernatural evidence of God, and of the things of God; a kind of spiritual light exhibited to the soul, and a supernatural
sight or perception thereof. . . .” Perfection, by that reckoning, was the badge of those “who do not limit God”; to the contrary, perfectionists are the harbingers of a greater visibility of divine things “when a fuller dispensation of the Spirit is given, then there has ever been known before.” It is that relentless drive to promote the visibility of sanctity and to place it, through its visibleness, beyond the reach of question or doubt which clearly locates Wesley as a figure of the eighteenth century; and it is that same drive which links Wesley in the same century with another great promoter of the visibility of Christianity, Jonathan Edwards.

Whatever else separates Edwards and Wesley, they were utterly at one in this regard, for although Edwards would have shrunk from a claim to “perfection” per se as a species of enthusiasm, he and Wesley were united in making Christianity a matter of visible, perceivable experience. “The reasonable creatures are the eye of the world,” Edwards wrote in his “Miscellaneies,” “and therefore it is requisite, that the beauty and excellency of the world, as God hath constituted it, should not be hid or kept secret.”

Since God has made the beauty and regularity of the natural world so publicly visible to all; it is much more requisite, that the moral beauty and regularity of his dispositions in the intelligent world, should be publicly visible. . . . It is as reasonable to suppose, that these will be as publicly visible as the brightness and beautiful order and motions of the heavenly bodies . . . and the beauties of nature in the air and on the face of the earth.

And seeing that “spiritual beauty consists principally in virtue and holiness,” Edwards made the famous and lengthy twelfth sign of “truly gracious and holy affections” in the Religious Affections (1746) to be “their exercise and fruit in Christian practice,” since “the tendency of grace in the heart to holy practice, is very direct, and the connection most natural close and necessary.” The visibility of Christian holiness, however, depended in large measure on the power and abilities of the individual to make it visible. That presented fewer problems for Wesley than for Edwards; like his Non-Juror exemplars, Wesley freely embraced an Arminianism which preached the unfettered ability of sinners to be converted and lay hands on grace. Edwards, however, was fearful of the Arminian route for its potential for robbing God of his transcendence, and for the possibility that it would lead not to visibility and perfection but to stagnation. Edwards’s route to visibility lay instead through his immaterialist ontology, while his route to action would lie through the ingenious formula he developed in Freedom of the Will (1754) for reconciling human willing and divine predestination through the famous dichotomy of human natural ability and moral inability.

The great treatise on Freedom of the Will gave to Edwards, and to his disciples Samuel Hopkins and Joseph Bellamy, the rhetorical equation they
needed to preserve the most ultra definitions of divine sovereignty while at the same time justifying the most radical and direct address to the human will for repentance, conversion, and adoration. All humanity, argued Edwards, possesses a full natural ability to will and to do, in that all have the natural means—arms, legs, brains, reason—that they shall ever need for action. But just as no effect can exist without a cause, people only will to do things in response to what Edwards called motives, which only God controls. What is more, all humanity is afflicted with a moral inability to respond to truly sanctified motives, and that, without a divine initiative, ensures that the human will never actually makes use of those natural abilities. This guaranteed that the New Divinity of Hopkins and Bellamy would be forever wedded to a “consistent Calvinism” which nonetheless still held people accountable for the use (or nonuse) of their natural ability.?

It also led the New Divinity to blaze some new paths of their own: the possession of full “natural ability” led them to condemn in the harshest terms the false visibility of “Antinomianism,” to call upon sinners to “change their own hearts,” and to advocate a stern moral rigorism that promised that no matter what good sinners might try to do—prayer, Bible reading, charity—all was turned to sin by their unwillingness to fully use their “natural ability” to first become saints. Ultimately, that same logic was what drove New Divinity Calvinism to flirt with perfectionism. “Natural ability” was what rendered all human beings accountable, and able to obey God’s laws; full “natural ability” ought then to require people to fully obey those laws. Natural ability, wrote Hopkins, requires “love exercised in a perfect manner and degree and expressed in all possible proper ways.”8 The naturally able will had no visible stopping point in the hands of New Divinity Calvinism, except in complete and perfect obedience.

The moment we look away from the New Divinity to Finney and Oberlin perfectionism, the kindred resemblance at once becomes apparent. Founded in 1833 by the Vermont missionary John Jay Shipherd, Oberlin had been organized in a tract of uncleared forest in Ohio’s Western Reserve as a New England colony and settled by New Englanders from the western Massachusetts and Connecticut counties most heavily influenced by Edwardsianism (Fairchild’s parents, for instance, had migrated to the Western Reserve along with a large group from Stockbridge, Massachusetts) who all solemnly bound themselves to a New England-style town covenant.9 The Oberlin Collegiate Institute had been conceived by Shipherd as a missionary training enterprise, and it might not have amounted to anything more than that had not Shipherd managed to locate a source of funding (in the form of the evangelical philanthropists Arthur and Lewis Tappan), a president in the person of Asa Mahan (a New School Presbyterian pastor from Cincinnati who had cut his theological milk teeth on the most radical forms of the New Divinity), and the greatest catch of all, the celebrated re-
vivalist, Finney. Even so, the Panic of 1837 nearly wiped out the Tappans and Oberlin, and only by extraordinary self-sacrifice and the national reputation of Finney did the college survive, attract students, and recruit a faculty. As it did, the New England color of the institution deepened. Although Finney preferred to efface his early associations with Edwardsianism in his Memoirs at the end of his life, he was actually born in the thick of the Connecticut New Divinity country in 1792 and raised among the New Divinity-influenced "Presbygational" union churches of frontier New York; and he received his mature education in Warren, Connecticut, under the eye of the New Divinity minister Peter Starr, one of Joseph Bellamy's theological pupils. Henry Cowles was another western New Englander and a Yale College graduate, like his brother John; the Irish-born John Morgan came from Williams College to teach New Testament; and James Dascomb, the science instructor, was a graduate of Dartmouth, where the heavy hand of the New Divinity was still felt under the presidency of Bennet Tyler.

In fact, the Oberlin faculty would have been surprised to discover that, by some accounts, they were less than Edwardsians. "It has never been our habit to commend our orthodoxy, by affirming our agreement with any human standards," wrote Henry Cowles in the Oberlin Evangelist, Oberlin's popular biweekly newspaper from 1838 till 1862. But if pressed to it, he cheerfully claimed "that we should choose to name the theology commonly known as that of New England . . . and as years ago, expounded by Edwards, Bellamy, and Hopkins." In contrast to the conventional image of the Oberlin Theology, the founders of Oberlin never seriously questioned the absolute sovereignty and transcendence of God; even Finney would speak of a free will only in the sense that a will is free when it has the moral ability to respond to motives for action which God places directly in the person's perception. "Human liberty does not consist in a self-determining power in the will," Finney wrote, but only in "the power which a moral agent possesses, of choosing in any direction, in view of motives." And if a will that moved only in response to divinely shown motives seemed to some critics to be something less than genuinely free, Finney was ready to explain the problem in terms of Edwards's great natural ability/moral inability dichotomy. "Natural ability relates to the powers and faculties of the mind," Finney explained to his New York City lecture audiences in 1836, and thus everyone has the natural ability to repent and at once; "moral ability" relates "only to the will," and can be exercised only by a divinely wrought change in the will. Finney acquired much of his notoriety in Calvinist circles from insisting on the grounds of natural ability that "a moral agent can resist any and every truth" and that moral agency "implies power to resist any degree of motive that may be brought to bear upon the mind"; what was less well noticed was how quickly Finney took it back on the grounds of moral...
inability by adding, "Whether any man ever did or ever will as a matter of fact, resist all truth, is entirely another question." Still, the possession by everyone of natural ability was enough to justify calls to repentance and enough to make the unrepentant accountable. "So it is explained," noted Finney, "by President Edwards, in his Treatise on the Will. . . ."

It was this which launched Oberlin, as it had launched the pioneers of the New Divinity a generation before, on a trajectory which bent ineluctably toward perfectionism. In their preoccupation with establishing human accountability, the Oberliners began as the New Divinity had begun, by eliminating any excuses people might offer for why their wills could not be considered free or their choices responsible. People could not plead an absence of responsibility because of divine sovereignty because, while it was "essential to the very being and nature of God that in the depths of eternity, he should have planned and disposed all events," this did "not mean that he rules or in any wise acts capriciously." The whole purpose of the natural ability/moral inability dichotomy had been to show that no amount of divine control or decree concerning one's moral choices logically canceled out the natural ability to choose otherwise, and therefore the responsibility for choosing (or not choosing). As Henry Cowles explained, Oberlin believed "in the actual interworking of human and divine agency" which "takes place without any such friction as dislocates the system, or lessens liberty of will." Nor could people complain that their "nature" or "constitution" predisposed them, through original sin or inherited depravity, to certain kinds of behavior or precluded an ability to repent. The Oberliners did not dispute that there were "appetites and propensities" or "impulses & Passions" which lay beneath the working consciousness and which might even be called "depraved." But none of these could be called sinful—in other words, none of this "depravation" was voluntary or moral and therefore could not be blamed for having caused one's volitions to become sinful. "These impulses & desires," argued Fairchild, "lying back of the will, are not sin—but are temptations to sin. The sin is in the voluntary action resulting." This, of course, clashed seriously with Old School Calvinism's doctrine of total natural depravity, but Oberliners like Samuel Cochran had long since come to the conclusion that this doctrine was "utterly absurd." It was true that "infirmities or constitutional tendencies to wrong action, temptations, may be transmitted" through natural generation, wrote Fairchild, and to that extent the Oberliners may be said to have believed in a notion of inherited original depravity in human beings. "But in strict thought and expression," Fairchild added, "sin belongs only to the agent who commits it, and cannot be transferred." Anything which suggested that the will of the individual should or could be set aside in explaining moral conduct smacked to the Oberliners of yet another flight from accountability.
Natural ability not only removed any excuse from accountability; in the process it further paved the way to perfectionism by demanding the fullest possible exertions of that ability, in terms of both quality and quantity. In the first instance, the old Hopkinsian demand for an ethic of disinterested benevolence translated easily into a demand by Finney that converts give themselves over to “absolute and universal self-renunciation” in which “every sinful indulgence must be crucified, and Christ become all in all to our life and happiness.” In fact, the Oberliners’ preoccupation with natural ability only served to raise the Hopkinsian stakes even higher. Without sinful natural depravity to blame for one’s failings, moral choices were no longer allowed to be mixed. “Moral character . . . must be either right or wrong,” declared Fairchild, “No intermediate position is possible.” If one possessed a natural ability to repent, one ipso facto possessed a natural ability to obey God up to the last degree of that ability at any given moment. “No partial becoming,” warned Fairchild: “the sinner must give up sin wholly or he does not do it at all, no withholding is possible in this surrender to God. Any reservation is total reservation.” Asa Mahan buttressed this by developing what became known as his doctrine of “the simplicity of moral action,” which declared that, despite complex appearances, each volition was really simple in nature and guided by one basic object or consideration. In this case, each volition was entirely sinful or entirely virtuous, a proposition which (Mahan added) involves “our special attention” to “the remark of Edwards upon this subject” and which John Morgan was confident “agrees with that which President Edwards urges in his Treatise on the Will, Part III, Sec. IV. . . .” The result, logically, was a “universal & perfect good will,” and thus the Oberliners arrived at the possibility, predicated on natural ability, of moral perfection. As James Harris Fairchild remarked, by “forbidding the co-existence of sin and holiness . . . conversion becomes necessarily entire consecration, obedience, & faith.” It awaited only the trigger of a student revival at the college in October 1836 to propel Finney and Mahan into public proclamation of the availability and obligation of perfection. “That there is a natural ability to be perfect is a simple matter of fact,” Finney announced for the first time to his New York City lecture audiences that winter. “It is self-evident that entire obedience to God’s law is possible on the ground of natural ability. . . .”

The image of Oberlin perfectionism which emerges from these texts spreads itself far wider than a simple frontier progressivism, and includes at its core a series of rigidly logical constructs, demanding a self-critical life of the most exhausting and exacting moral strenuousness and based (to a largely unsuspected degree) on the presumption of the Edwardsian concept of fully accountable natural ability. “What is perfection?” Finney asked, then replied in 1837: “The law itself goes no further than to require the right use of the powers you possess, so that it is a simple matter of fact that you
possess natural ability, or power, to be just as perfect as God requires.” This turned Oberlin perfectionism, as it had turned the New Divinity, into a kind of anti-antinomianism, a species of moral rigorism designed to force saints and sinners into a full realization of the obligations and opportunities of natural ability. “By entire sanctification, I understand the consecration of the whole being to God,” wrote Finney in the Oberlin Evangelist. “Do nothing, be nothing, buy nothing, sell nothing, possess nothing, do not marry nor decline marriage, do not study nor refrain study, but in a spirit of entire devotion to God.” There was no relaxation in Finney’s model of the Christian: the key words of the Oberliners were law and duty, not grace and certainly not rest. “What is perfection in holiness?” asked Mahan. “Perfection in holiness implies a full and perfect discharge of our entire duty, of all existing obligations in respect to God and all other beings.” In the simplest terms, “Moral perfection” was “simply inward & outward sincere performance of all duty.”

This might have been all well and good for Finney and Mahan, who were “not satisfied to merely live without positive disobedience” but who wanted to press “to the highest degree of likeness to God,” but it seemed to offer to more ordinary mortals no more hopeful prospect than “constant battling with every opposition.” What saved Oberlin perfection from demanding more than human flesh could normally sustain was the reminder that natural ability and moral accountability extended only to “a perfect conformity of the will to God's law, or willing right.” Perfection was a rule which applied strictly to the conduct of the will—to self-conscious volitions—as the only moral faculty or attribute which humans exercised. “Sin and holiness are confined to the attitude or action of the will,” according to Fairchild. “Evil tendencies or impulses, in the nature, are temptations, not sin; and good impulses are not virtue.” It was possible, therefore, to have benevolent feelings or inclinations, but they counted for nothing beside the demands of the Oberliners until they were translated into action; likewise, it was possible to be tempted, in the sense that some “appetite” or “passion”—say, for sexual or material satisfaction—might stimulate a selfish or immoral urge for disobedience of the divine law. “But, in such cases,” explained Finney, “the sin is not wilful, in the sense of being deliberate or intentional . . . it is rather a slip, an inadvertency, a momentary yielding under the pressure of highly excited feeling,” and hence is not really counted as a sin at all.

Thus, no matter how forbidding their brand of perfection seemed, the Oberliners were at pains to make clear that perfection did not mean that one could not make mistakes, nor did it mean that one could not experience temptation or even make moral misjudgments based on one’s “natural” faculties of perception and reason. What it meant was that one did not act—that the will did not execute—on those temptations or misjudgments,
since, after all, it was only on the abilities of the will that freedom and accountability could be assessed. “However excited the states of the sensibility may be,” cautioned Finney, “if the will does not yield, there is strictly no sin.” Finney unwittingly illustrated this distinction in the spring of 1836 when he urged Arthur Tappan not to jeopardize the antislavery cause by agitating too publicly for the social integration of the races. “I admit that the distinction on account of color & some peculiarities of physical Organization is a silly & often wicked prejudice,” Finney conceded. The key word was often, for such a prejudice would only be genuinely wicked if one was naturally able to think otherwise; whereas “a man may entirely from constitutional taste be unwilling to marry a colored woman or have a daughter marry a colored man & yet be a devoted friend of the colored people”—and still be entirely sanctified, too, since a “taste,” unlike the will, cannot help being anything other than what it is.21

This, as the Oberliners were eager to point out, set them off decisively from the perfectionism being practiced by come-outer communities like the Shakers and the Amana brethren, or by spiritual permissives like John Humphrey Noyes. Finney was appalled that “so many, that have embraced the doctrine of entire sanctification, have coupled it with the errors of the perfectionists,” which Finney dismissed as “the most loathsome form of fanaticism that ever existed.” The Oberlin doctrine of perfection and its “doctrine of the unity or simplicity of moral action,” insisted Fairchild, “has been maintained by Theologians of New England, and cannot be considered original here.”22 But Finney was just as eager to distance himself from the Methodists, the other major claimant, through Wesley, to perfection. Both Finney and Mahan read Wesley’s Plain Account and had numerous direct dealings with Methodism (it is likely, for instance, that Finney copied the device of the celebrated “anxious bench” from Methodist camp meetings, although he cast his rationale for its use in terms of Edwardsian “natural ability” rather than Wesleyan free will). But the Oberliners rejected Wesley’s construction of perfection as “superficial” and bound “almost altogether to states of the sensibility” rather than the intellect. Finney was also offended by Wesley’s insistence that perfection sprang from “that aid of the Holy Spirit” in “what the Arminians call a gracious ability, which terms are a manifest absurdity.” If ability came by grace, then without grace the entire human race was naturally unable to obey God and had a perfect excuse for its sinfulness. “If I rightly understand him,” Finney wrote about Wesley, “he makes perfection to consist in just what you do with the exception of freedom from mistake.” The Oberlin Evangelist attacked the Methodists as a “hindrance to evangelical piety,” because Methodism “has no taste at all for the solid indoctrination of Puritan times—but an insatiable itching for something that will put good feeling into the heart.” Thus Finney could “by no means adopt” the perfectionism of the Wesleyan writers, “& few
Surprisingly for most modern commentators, the Methodists were inclined to agree with Finney's distinction between Wesleyan and Oberlin perfection. The American theorist of Methodist perfectionism, George Peck, insisted that "Christian perfection . . . does not imply perfect obedience to the moral law," and the Oberlin theory consequently "is understood by their opponents to differ in this respect from the Wesleyan theory." The Oberliners, in fact, "have finally taken up views essentially defective, and views which, as Wesleyans, we can have no sympathy." Daniel Denison Whedon, the editor of the influential Methodist Quarterly Review who had been a Finney convert but had chosen to follow Wesley instead, attacked Finney's perfectionism as mere "New Divinity . . . on every point," full of "perplexity and contradiction."24

In fact, it was on precisely the issue of "gracious ability" that Finney and Mahan came to a dramatic falling out in the 1840s, as Mahan's personal experience of perfection became interlocked with what Mahan called "the baptism of the Holy Ghost." Mahan, whose personal connections with the Methodists were substantially more numerous than Finney's, came to see perfection as a second experience of conversion, "a work wrought in us by the Holy Spirit" and not a product of natural ability. By the mid-1840s, he was advising his Oberlin colleagues that "when our Methodist brethren speak of 'indwelling sin,' and pray to be delivered from it, they use language perfectly Scriptural and proper, and which, I think, Calvinists of the New School have unwisely dropped." The more Mahan spoke of perfection as "an instantaneous work," the more Finney and the other Oberliners suspected that Mahan was making perfection over into a matter of natural inability, which therefore offered a ground of excuse to every moral laggard to claim helplessness in obeying divine law.25 Finney broadly suggested that Mahan had been deluded by the Methodists into thinking that "the Spirit leads the people of God by impressions on their sensibility or feelings" or other "constitutional" faculties rather than "obedience to the demands of reason or to the law of God as it lies revealed in the reason." Fairchild seconded Finney's condemnation of Mahan by disputing "the idea of a definite experience marking the instant of entire sanctification," and he too suggested that this led people into a "form of religious life which is much below holiness." James Armstrong Thome distanced the Oberlin Evangelist from what was already being called in 1860 "the higher life" by insisting that "there is but one sort of Christian life—that which is lived by the faith of the Son of God." As a result, beginning in 1844, the Oberlin faculty began a steady campaign to oust Mahan from the presidency of the college, and in August 1850 they succeeded. In time, Mahan converted outright to
Finney's most fundamental objection to Mahan's "baptism of the Holy Ghost" was the loss of the legal imperative for moral perfection, which was also what the Oberliners most feared from antinomianism. What Finney saw in Mahan was, in effect, a privatization of holiness, turned this time into a personal and ineffable experience which made demands only upon the interior life of the individual. Despite the stage-show paraphernalia of the "new measures" and the "anxious bench," Finney's rhetoric remained firmly rooted in the eighteenth century's use of rationalized public communication between autonomous individuals to create consensus. Accordingly, Finney's perfectionism conceived of holiness as a quality to be produced by a logical movement from rational propositions to action, whereas in Mahan's hands perfectionism was turning into a holiness to be consumed, a personalized commodity whose need was created by the "sensibility or feelings." What sharpened this contrast was Finney's apprehension that, against the background of the market revolution which was transforming United States society during the very decades of the 1830s and 1840s when Oberlin perfectionism was being articulated, the Finneyite version of visible holiness would be the one with which the society would grow increasingly uncomfortable. 27

Finney and the Oberliners, fearing this and resenting its implications, railed unceasingly against the consumerization and privatization of piety. "How much evil is done by temporizing and keeping out of view the great and numberless points of difference between Christianity and the spirit of the world?" asked Finney. "Is it not most manifest that a want of thoroughly taking up and pressing this subject of entire consecration upon Christians in revivals of religion, is the very reason why they decline and react to the great dishonor of the Savior?" Finney was aware of the voices which "objected that Christians should leave human governments to the management of the ungodly," but he countered, "The promotion of public and private order and happiness is one of the indispensable means of saving souls." By making Christianity legally and rigorously visible, the Oberliners hoped to keep down the rising wall between public and private in a consumer-driven society—and nothing stymied them more than to know that they were failing. "Men are put in nomination for president; how few care to inquire whether they are licentious or not," complained Henry Cowles, as he watched Christianity rendered politically invisible. "Whether they are for virtue, or no virtue; for moral purity, or no moral purity, is a small affair." But Oberlin College, in the end, could not even keep Oberlin perfect. In 1855, an Episcopal parish—representing a denomination whose wealth and status were the very embodiment of commercial success in U.S.
society — was opened in Oberlin, over the college’s impotent complaints. Finney came to suspect Fairchild of half-heartedness in the pursuit of holiness, and eventually came to dread the prospect of leaving the college in Fairchild’s hands; and Finney even came to mistrust Edwards, turning the essays in his Lectures on Systematic Theology in 1846 and 1847 into criticisms of Edwards for not having given more space to the demands of natural ability.28

If Oberlin perfectionism was a failure, however — and as a living force, it really died with Finney, although Fairchild would have surprised him by the consistency with which he upheld the old arguments in the 1880s — it was an important failure. The demonstrable linkages between Oberlin and the eighteenth-century Edwardsians demonstrate the remarkable persistence of Edwards’s potent theological formulae, especially on freedom of the will. At the same time, the Oberlin propensity to overdramatize natural ability beyond what all but its apologists would call Calvinism and to make perfection (which in the hands of the New Divinity had been little more than a logical possibility) their central theme underscores the degree to which the Oberliners found no easy method of transferring the agenda of the Edwardsians to the cultural climate of the antebellum republic. Still, Finney’s demand for a holiness which would be visible and public rather than privatized and sentimental did not entirely lose its voice, even within the modern holiness movement. This raises an interesting question, not just about Finney’s connections to the modern holiness movement but also about the historical diversity of the holiness movement itself. It may be a mistake to rest so much of the origins of the holiness movement on Wesley and Methodism, for as Donald Dayton and Bruce Moyer have suggested, the moral and ethical demands of the most radical strains of the holiness movement are representative of a more rigorous version of visible Christianity that runs back through Finney.29 But, to the surprise of some of its modern proponents, this also means that the most ethically demanding variations of holiness theology may owe more, through Finney, to Edwardsianism and the New England Calvinist theological tradition than they have realized.

Oberlin perfectionism was not, in that sense, a forward-looking, democratic, or even revolutionary doctrine. Whatever the other influences on it, its most important intellectual roots lay in the eighteenth century, not the nineteenth, and it owed its distinctive architecture much more to Jonathan Edwards than Andrew Jackson. At a time when the market revolution seemed intent on privatizing and sentimentalizing piety for the purpose of consumption, Oberlin asserted the public claims of Edwardsian moralism and disinterested benevolence on the will, not the feelings. Perhaps, like the New Divinity, Oberlin perfectionism had no chance of success in the real world of the nineteenth century; perhaps it was only predicated on an
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16. Fairchild, "Oberlin Theology," Manuscript articles, Box 29, Fairchild Papers; see also Finney, Lectures on Systematic Theology (Oberlin, 1847), vol. 2, pp. 204.


19. Mahan, Christian Perfection, pp. 1–2; Fairchild, “Revealed Theology,” Lecture Notebook No. 1, Box 25, Fairchild Papers; Finney, Sermon Outline, 1870, in Finney Papers. It was not clear precisely what the Oberliners meant by “laws” since the definitions varied from a strict application of biblical injunctions to Mahan’s appeal to “fundamental elements of human nature itself.” In general, however, the Oberliners increasingly appealed to an intuitive apprehension of moral obligation, which they owed largely to the rising influence of Scottish “common sense” philosophy in Oberlin’s thinking, mixed with the Hopkinsian directive to express that obligation in the form of a universal “disinterested benevolence.” See Mahan, “Certain Fundamental Principles, together with their Applications,” in Oberlin Quarterly Review 12 (November 1846), p. 232; Finney, Lectures on Systematic Theology (Oberlin, 1846), vol. 1, p. 544, and “The Inner and the Outer Revelation,” in Oberlin Evangelist (February 15, 1854), p. 25. See also James H. Fairchild, Moral Philosophy; or, the Science of Obligation (New York, 1869), p. 40.


22. Finney, “Professor Finney’s Letters—No. 5,” in Oberlin Evangelist (April 24, 1839), p. 73; “Extract from Prof. Fairchild’s Address on Oberlin: Its Origin, Progress and Results,” in Oberlin Evangelist (October 10, 1860), p. 162.


