

A Course Outline on
Jonathan Edwards' *Freedom of the Will*

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I. Introduction

A. Historical Context of *Freedom of the Will*

1. The *Freedom of the Will* was first published in Boston in 1754.¹
2. *Freedom of the Will* is a reduction of the title Jonathan Edwards gave this book. The full title is “A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of that Freedom of Will which is Supposed to be Essential to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame.”
 - a) The phrase “Careful and Strict Inquiry” notes Edwards’ rigorous philosophical intent.
 - b) The phrase “Modern Prevailing Notions” is an identification and reference to the rising dominance of Arminian thought in Colonial America during Edwards’ time.
 - c) The phrases, “Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame” are four main areas Arminians chiefly regarded as areas wherein it could be demonstrated that the human will is free.
3. The Philosophical Milieu of Edwards’ day
 - a) It is difficult to assess exactly what books Edwards was familiar with, working with, and/or responding to, though many attempts have been made to determine this.²
 - b) Scholastically, Jonathan Edwards was as educated as one could be during his time period. Edwards received his B.A. from New Haven college when he was 16 years old. He continued his education there earning an M.A. and after that went on to tutor (teach) at Yale for a few years. Edwards read nearly everything he could get his hands on and kept a catalogue of all the books he read. In 1757 Edwards became the second president of the now prestigious, Princeton University.³

¹ Ian H. Murray, Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987) 478.

² Norman Fiering, Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Thought and Its British Context (Williamsburg, Virg.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1981) 13-47.

³ Murray, Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography, 33, 55, 47, 67-68, 438.

c) John Locke, the continental rationalist familiar to the educated of Colonial America in the 18th century,⁴ had significant impact upon Jonathan Edwards, who sometimes even referred to him by name in various writings.

d) How much John Locke influenced Edwards is a matter of debate. However, though Edwards clearly modifies Locke's thought in a range of ways, he does accept the primary and most basic premise Locke is famous for. As Sang Lee states, "Edwards did accept Locke's basic empiricistic maxim that knowledge must be through, and based upon, sensation."⁵

d) The general philosophical environment in Colonial America in the 18th century is difficult to assess. Colonial America had a rich and pervasive Puritan presence and history and was therefore very theologically and religiously oriented. However, in the big picture, America was a product of England and the British and European movement of the Enlightenment was underway. Samuel Miller in his two volume work, "A Brief Retrospect of the American Eighteenth Century" documents the philosophical presence of Hume, Berkley, Newton, Kant, Descartes, Malebranche, and others in America at this time.⁶ The general mood of the Enlightenment was that reason is the vehicle for possessing knowledge.

4. The Arminian Milieu of Edwards' day

a) In 1737 Jonathan Edwards wrote "about this time (referring to the fall of 1737) began the great noise, in this part of the country, about Arminianism, which seemed to appear with a very threatening aspect upon the interest of religion."⁷

⁴ Robert Audi, The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy (Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, 1991) 253; Fiering, Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought and Its British Context, 33-47.

⁵ Sang Hyun Lee, The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) 119.

⁶ Samuel Miller, A Brief Retrospect of the American 18th Century (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001).

⁷ Jonathan Edwards, The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 1, "A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Soul in Northampton, and the Neighboring Towns and Villages of New Hampshire, in New England," ed. Edward Hickman (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003) 347.

b) By 1740 Arminianism had prevailed at both Harvard and Yale among the professors.⁸

c) Edwards set himself to thoroughly study Arminianism. In 1747 he wrote in a letter, “I have been reading Whitby, which has engaged me thoroughly in the study of the Arminian controversy, and I have written considerably upon it in my private papers...I have got so deep into this controversy that I am not willing to dismiss it till I know the utmost of these matters...If you could enquire...and find me what is the best book on the Arminian side, for their defence of their notion of free will...”⁹ Throughout *Freedom of the Will* Edwards quotes and responds to the writings of Dr. Whitby and Dr. Chubb, who are both Arminians.

d) Arminianism briefly summarized.¹⁰

1) Jacob Arminius was born in 1559 and in 1581 entered the Geneva Academy. John Calvin founded the Geneva Academy and in 1564 was succeeded by his son-in-law Theodore Beza, whom Jacob Arminius studied under.¹¹

2) Arminius had difficulty accepting Beza’s teaching that God causes all things according to His Divine decree. Thus, Arminius spent his time studying the medieval scholastics of the Roman Catholic Church in order to try and find a way to conceive of the Divine decrees being conditional.¹²

3) Once leaving the Geneva Academy Arminius took on a pastorate in Amsterdam where he began preaching his ideas. Many fellow pastors charged him with heresy, but

⁸ Murray, Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987) 211.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 282-3.

¹⁰ Throughout *Freedom of the Will* Jonathan Edwards refers by name to the Arminians, and Dr. Whitby and Dr. Chubb, who both are Arminian representatives.

¹¹ Robert A. Peterson and Michael D. Williams, Why I Am Not an Arminian (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004) 98-99.

¹² *Ibid.*, 99.

the University of Leiden decided to give him a teaching post.¹³

4) It was not long before Arminius produced a document recording his views titled “Declaration of Sentiments.” Its effect was two-fold. On one hand it influenced and persuaded others to adopt Arminius’ brand of theology. On the other hand it drew more and more charges of heresy from pastors and college professors alike.

5) Arminius died in 1609 and in 1610 forty-three of his supporters got together and drew up a document titled “The Remonstrants.” *The Remonstrants* was intended to respond to the charges of heresy and to summarize their theological beliefs following the teaching of Jacob Arminius.

6) *The Remonstrants* present and attempt to defend five primary articles:

First: Preventive Grace. They affirm that God provided in advance a saving grace for all human beings, despite any sin and/or its effects. This enables all human beings to freely choose to love God out of a goodness of their own free will which God has given to everyone by grace.

Second: Conditional Election. They affirm that the Bible does speak about election for salvation but that this election of God is dependant upon the condition of human beings choosing Christ out of a free will. The ability to freely choose Christ comes from Preventive grace.

Third: Universal Atonement. They affirm that Christ’s atonement is universal in its potential ability to save everyone. The atonement is available for all those who have Preventive grace and thereby have a goodness from which they can choose Christ of their own free will and receive His atonement for their sins.

Fourth: Resistible Grace. They affirm that humans need God’s grace to become saved and that He has given this grace to everyone.

¹³ Ibid., 99-100.

Yet they say not all humans are thus saved because they have ability of their own free will to resist or refuse this saving grace.

Fifth: Conditional Perseverance: They affirm that a human being's salvation can change. In order for one's salvation to persevere until the end it is conditional upon that person's consistent choosing of salvation by their continued free will.

e) As Edwards anticipated, many of the churches who adopted the Arminian scheme eventually lapsed into the radically unorthodox beliefs of universalism and unitarianism.¹⁴

B. Current Perspectives on *Freedom of the Will*

1. It is the greatest philosophical piece ever to come out of America.

a) Paul Ramsey in his "Introduction" to the Yale edition of *Freedom of the Will*, states that based upon this work Edwards was "the greatest philosopher-theologian yet to grace the American scene."¹⁵

b) Alexander V. G. Allen states that the *Freedom of the Will* is "the one large contribution which America has made to the deeper philosophical thought of the world."¹⁶

c) *Freedom of the Will* is still standard required reading in most all Ph.D. programs in philosophy.

2. It is a quasi-philosophical work, totally corrupted by the shackles of religion.

- Herbert W. Schneider states, "His philosophical insight was buried under the ruins of his religion."¹⁷

¹⁴ Murray, Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography, 454.

¹⁵ Paul Ramsey, "Introduction" in Freedom of the Will (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957) 591.

¹⁶ Alexander V. G. Allen, "Thought: Philosophical, The Freedom of the Will," Critical Essays on Jonathan Edwards, ed. William J. Scheick (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co.: 1980) 89.

¹⁷ Herbert W. Schneider, The Puritan Mind (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1930) 177.

3. It is one of the strongest and most thorough refutations of Arminianism ever put in print.

II. An Interpretive Outline of *Freedom of the Will*

A summary of each division in Edwards' outline of his *Freedom of the Will*.¹⁸

PREFACE

In Edwards' preface he openly acknowledges that he finds much fault with the Arminian scheme of theology. He raises the question of whether or not these "professing Christians" believe what they do because they have "sincerely and impartially" studied the Holy Scriptures or not. The preface concludes with a humble plea that the truth be shown unto all the "prayers of all sincere lovers of truth."

PART I - WHEREIN ARE EXPLAINED AND STATED VARIOUS TERMS AND THINGS BELONGING TO THE SUBJECT OF THE ENSUING DISCOURSE¹⁹

SECTION I - *Concerning the Nature of the Will*

Here Edwards first defines the will. His definition is as follows: "The faculty of the *Will*, is that power, or principle of mind, by which it is capable of *choosing*: an act of the *Will* is the same as an act of choosing or choice."²⁰ In order to clarify he adds many additional synonyms such as: refusing, approving, disapproving, liking, disliking, embracing, rejecting, determining, directing, commanding, forbidding, inclining, or being averse, being pleased or displeased with, or to act electively.

Will is distinguished from desire. Desire is different, though related. One may have conflicting desires, but no one can ever will anything they do not desire. Thus the will must deliberate so that in every act, that is, every willing, there is some "preponderation of the mind."

SECTION II - *Concerning the Determination of the Will*

The question of what determines the will is a question of cause. Since there is an effect of every willing act there must be a cause which determines it. What determines the will is the motive which is strongest in one's mind. Motive is whatever moves or invites the mind to act of will.

The will always acts toward the greatest apparent good. "Good" is what appears agreeable or seems pleasing to the mind. Things that make something appear agreeable may be beauty and/or future consequence(s), which may be desirable or non-desirable.

¹⁸ Words in all capitals and section titles are Edwards own writing and divisions.

¹⁹ The parts function somewhat like chapter headings, though none contain any writing proceeding them before the first section.

²⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 1, "On the Freedom of the Will," ed. Edward Hickman (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003) 4-5.

SECTION III - *Concerning the Meaning of the Terms Necessity, Impossibility, Inability, etc.; and of Contingence*

Necessity, impossibility, and inability are all synonyms. They are “whatever must be and cannot be otherwise.”²¹ Contingence is the opposite, it is anything which comes to pass by change or accident.

SECTION IV - *Of the Distinction of Natural and Moral Necessity, and Inability.*

Moral necessity that which arises from moral causes or strength of inclination or motives. Natural necessity is the force of natural causes upon men including habits and dispositions of the hearts. The distinction between them is that former is general and habitual, the latter is particular and occasional.

SECTION V - *Concerning the Notion of Liberty, and of Moral Agency.*

The plain and obvious meaning of the word liberty or freedom is “the power, opportunity, or advantage, that may one has, to do as he pleases.”²²

The way Arminians and Pelagians define liberty or freedom is characterized by three things: (1) Self-determining power whereby the will determines its own acts. (2) Indifference whereby all previous act of will still leave the mind in equilibrium. (3) Contingency whereby there is no connection in the will between previous grounds or reasons as necessary.

“A moral agent is a being that is capable of those actions which have a moral quality.”²³ [as a note there is a great paragraph in this section on God as a moral agent]

PART II - WHEREIN IT IS CONSIDERED WHETHER THERE IS OR CAN BE ANY SUCH SORT OF FREEDOM OF WILL, AS THAT WHEREIN ARMINIANS PLACE THE ESSENCE OF THE LIBERTY OF ALL MORAL AGENTS; AND WHETHER ANY SUCH THING EVER WAS OR CAN BE CONCEIVED OF.

SECTION I - *Showing the Manifest Inconsistency of the Arminian notion of Liberty of Will, Consisting in the Will's Self-Determining Power.*

The Arminian notion of the liberty of will is as follows, “If the will determines its own free acts, then every free act of choice is determined by a preceding act of choice, choosing that act.”²⁴ This is a contradiction because the supposed free act of the will determined the next possibility of the next free will act, but if an act of the will is free it cannot be determined. In addition, if one follows the causes of each free act of the will backward

²¹ Ibid., 8.

²² Ibid., 11.

²³ Ibid., 12.

²⁴ Ibid., 13.

through the train of free will acts, how can there ever be a first free act of the will to start the chain of free will acts?

SECTION II - *Several supposed Ways of Evading the Foregoing Reasoning Considered.*

If one says the acts of the will are determined in the order of nature, but not in the order of time, it does not help. The chain of determined free acts backward through the order of nature is distinct from time. The effect of acts happen in time, but time is not a cause, it is merely the recognition of linear motion in a certain direction.

If one says the acts of the will are not determined by anything preceding the acts but are determined in the very act of acting itself, a self-refuting statement has been made. For, “to say, that the will or mind orders, influences, and determines itself to exert an act by the very exertion itself, is to make the exertion both cause and effect.”²⁵

If one says the acts of the will have no cause nor effect, then the words being used have no meaning since in the very statement that “the will determines itself” assumes that something determines the will.

SECTION III - *Whether Any Event Whatsoever, and Volition in Particular, can Come to Pass Without a Cause of its Existence.*

The word “cause” signifies that which has a positive efficiency or influence to produce a thing or bring it to pass. “Nothing ever comes to pass without a cause.”²⁶ Anything without a cause is self-existent from eternity, but all things that begin to be therefore must have some foundation for their existence outside of themselves. This is common sense and if it be taken away all arguing is in vain.

From Romans 1:20 three things may be ascertained: First, we may look at the effects on earth as being from an eternal cause. Second, we may prove by argumentation that this Being exists. Third, by positing this Being’s necessary existence several things may be immediately known.

If it is allowed that things may come to pass without any cause, we would have no evidence for God’s existence or the existence of any other thing.

If one imagines that the free acts of the will are different than all other things which all have causes, then in the very act of making this argument they have proven themselves to be wrong since they are attempting to give a reason for why the will is the way it is.

SECTION IV - *Whether Volition can Arise Without a Cause, through the Activity of the Nature of the Soul.*

²⁵ Ibid., 15.

²⁶ Ibid.

Edwards gives five reasons why there being activity of the soul does not enable any possibility for an act of the will to arise without a cause. One, “The activity of the soul may enable it to be the cause of effects, but it does not at all enable it to be the subject of effects which have no cause.”²⁷ Two, simply noting that there is action of the soul is does not answer the question about why certain acts are performed. Three, activity cannot be a cause, if there are no acts there is no activity. Four, if the acts of the will arise without cause from the activity of the soul there would effects of the acts of the will would all be different at different times. Fifth, even if it is granted that somehow the activity of the nature of the soul enables acts of the will to arise without a cause, then that argument has admitted that the activity of the soul has a determining effect upon the act of the will.

SECTION V - Showing that if the Things Asserted in these Evasions should be supposed to be True, they are Altogether Impertinent, and Cannot Help the Cause of Arminian Liberty; and how, This Being the State of the Case, Arminian Writers are Obliged to Talk Inconsistently.

Even if it is granted that uncaused acts of the will successively cause without causing further uncaused acts of the will, the question remains of what caused this chain? For there to be successive uncaused acts of the will there must be an infinite amount of free acts of the will without any beginning. Once there is a beginning there is a cause and if there is a cause no act of the will can be uncaused.

SECTION VI - Concerning the Will Determining in things which are Perfectly Indifferent in the View of the Mind.

It is supposedly a great argument for self-determining power that men universally experience an ability to determine their wills. However, all that is recognized in our experience is the ability to choose to do a thing, it says nothing about preference. Yet the “very act of choosing one thing rather than another, is preferring that thing, and that is setting a higher value on that thing...Choice or preference cannot be before itself in the same instance...it cannot be the foundation of itself, or the consequence of itself.”²⁸ It is not difficult to recognize that the mind is influenced in its choice. Several ideas are present in the mind at once and its choice is guided by what is most preferable in its decision to exercise an act of the will.

SECTION VII - Concerning the Notion of Liberty of Will, Consisting in Indifference.

Pelagians, Semi-Pelagians, Jesuits, Socinians, and Arminians consider the liberty of the will in indifference, the will is considered free from any predetermination and has a complete opportunity to act however it wills.

²⁷ Ibid., 17.

²⁸ Ibid., 19.

With this conception of the freedom of the will, “the least degree of antecedent bias” would cause the will to be unfree.

To say the will in action prefers one thing to another and at the very same time has no preference is absurd. In this notion of liberty, liberty is the exact opposite of volition. In the very first moment volition acts, freedom ceases to be for choice is an act of determination.

If one says that liberty is in a power of the mind to suspend an act of the will and is thereby indifferent then two questions arise: One, how then can the will exercise liberty, if liberty is not in an act of the will? Two, how then can there ever be any deliberating or determining of the mind which moves it to make an act of the will? For then deliberating or determining would involve preference or preconception or predisposition, which would then violate the supposed liberty in this suspending act of the mind.

SECTION VIII - *Concerning the supposed Liberty of the Will, as Opposite to All Necessity.*

“For an event to have a cause and ground of its existence and yet not to be connected with its cause, is an inconsistency.”²⁹ If one says the connection and dependence is not total, but partial, then what part of the event is an effect of that cause and where or what does the other part consist of?

If something may or may not be, then why do some things occur and other not? Are we to believe there is no cause or reason for why some things happen and others do not?

To suppose there are events which have a cause and ground of their existence and are yet not connected with their cause is to suppose they have a cause which is not their cause, which is a contradiction.

SECTION IX - *Of the Connection of the Acts of the Will with the Dictates of the Understanding.*

Dr. Whitby, an Arminian, accepts that men act according to what seems most agreeable to them. He also accepts that the greatest good is proposed to man along with the greatest evil threatened. Yet he supposes that man is indisposed to one choice over the other and considers the liberty of the will to be in an equal evaluation of both. However, this cannot be, because then every man’s right and equal evaluation would lead him to always choose the good and not the evil.

If bad habits are posited as the reason for why men do not choose the good, it only pushes the question back further. What determined all the acts which formed a habit, which caused man not to choose the good? If each determining act of the will was caused by a bad habit then there must either be an infinite amount of bad habits acts or a first act which was disposed toward evil.

²⁹ Ibid., 24.

SECTION X - *Volition Necessarily Connected with the Influence of Motives: with Particular Observations on the Great Inconsistency of Mr. Chubb's Assertions and Reasonings about the Freedom of the Will.*

Edwards identifies five major inconsistencies in the writings of Mr. Chubb, an Arminian. One, Mr. Chubb asserts that the will is influenced by motive as the ground and reason of the will's acts. Yet at the same time Mr. Chubb also asserts that the motives are the consequence of the volition or choice of the mind. Two, Mr. Chubb considers the motive to be passive as the effect of a free act of the will enabling another subsequent free act. Edwards notes that since every volition has to have a previous motive, the first in the whole series cannot be passive. Three, Mr. Chubb thinks volition always takes place because of motive, yet at the same time he asserts that the will does not always follow the strongest motive and instead chooses what motive to follow. Forth, Mr. Chubb supposes that the power of contrary choice is essential to agency. If so, then "the will is at liberty to choose what kind of good it chooses to choose...(a liberty) not only of a man's power to move his body, agreeable to an antecedent act of choice, but to use or exert the faculties of his soul."³⁰ Edwards points out the resulting problem that there is either an infinite amount of free acts causing each other back into eternity or the very first choice could not have been a free act. Fifth, Mr. Chubb says that the motives excite the will but do not move it. Edwards points out the absurdity of a causal motive which is ineffectual and the meaninglessness of such a statement.

SECTION XI - *The Evidence of God's Certain Foreknowledge of the Volitions of Moral Agents.*

In this section Edwards makes five main arguments for God's foreknowledge. Each argument is filled with a barrage of Scriptural support. The first argument is a survey of Scriptures wherein God predicts events. The second argument surveys Scriptural events which God could not have foreknown and statement He could not have made if the volitions of man could not have been foreknown. The third argument is that if God is ignorant of the future volitions of free agents then God must repent for what has happened since he would then wish it otherwise. The forth argument is that God must constantly be changing his mind and intentions since the free actions of moral agents keep putting his kingdom out of order. The fifth argument is that God must be disappointed with His creation if free moral agents thwarted the end for which the world was made.

³⁰ Ibid., 29.

SECTION XII - *God's Certain Foreknowledge of the Future Volitions of Moral Agents, Inconsistent with such a Contingence of those Volitions as is without all Necessity.*

This is a long section wherein Edwards meticulously moves through several precise points to prove that God's foreknowledge of future events makes those future events necessary. Edwards has three main lines of reasoning. One, future events are "infallibly and indissolubly connected with...(that which) already hath, or has had existence."³¹ Two, if there are really future contingent events then it is impossible for God to know them. Three, it is inconsistent to say that God can both foreknow all future events and that those future events are contingent.

SECTION XIII - *Whether we suppose the Volitions of Moral Agents to be Connected with any thing Antecedent, or not, yet they must be Necessary in such a sense as to Overthrow Arminian Liberty.*

"Every act of the will has a cause, or it has not. If it has a cause, then, it is not contingent, but necessary."³² If the will has no cause preceding it then neither can any act be made out of it, for this would then be a determining cause.

PART III - WHEREIN IS INQUIRED, WHETHER ANY SUCH LIBERTY OF WILL AS ARMINIANS HOLD, BE NECESSARY TO MORAL AGENCY, VIRTUE, AND VICE, PRAISE AND DISPRAISE, ETC.

SECTION I - *God's Moral Excellency, Necessary, yet Virtuous and Praiseworthy*

Dr. Whitby, an Arminian, supposes that there can be no such thing as virtue or vice if a moral agent is not able to make free acts of the will to perform either one or the other. In response, Edwards launches into a study of God, the moral agent, who is not able to act in vice and is yet praiseworthy.

SECTION II - *The Acts of the Will, of the Human Soul of Jesus Christ; Necessarily Holy, yet Truly Virtuous, Praiseworthy, Rewardable, etc.*

In this section, in order to show that being able to make free acts of the will is not what makes a moral agent, Edwards uses numerous Scriptures to demonstrate that Jesus Christ, the God-man, is a moral agent and yet is not able to sin.

SECTION III - *The Case of such as are given up of God to Sin, and of Fallen Man in General, Proves Moral Necessity and Inability to be Consistent with Blameworthiness.*

³¹ Ibid., 35.

³² Ibid., 40.

Dr. Whitby, an Arminian, asserts that freedom is essential to any thing deserving the name of sin. Edwards notes then that all those of whom several Scriptures say God gave up to sin, must then be blameless.

Dr. Whitby says that the impossibility of avoiding sin wholly excuses a man. Edwards responds by bringing up the clear statement of Scripture, which Arminians affirm, that it is impossible for a man to have the power to perform perfect obedience to all the commands of God. Furthermore, Christ died to satisfy the imperfections of man's obedience. Thus, the Arminians are inconsistent and charge God with injustice and Christ's death as unnecessary.

SECTION IV - Command and Obligation to Obedience, Consistent with Moral Inability to Obey.

Arminians insist that it is absurd for God to require of men that which they are unable to do. Edwards responds in three main ways: One, "The will itself, and not only those actions which are the effects of the will, is the proper object of precept or command."³³ Two, the defect of the will is in its "original and determining act," which instigates a chain of acts of the will determined by previous acts of the will. Three, "a thing commanded implies a moral inability to that thing."³⁴ If the will is simply commanded to be, when it already is, there would be no use of a precept.

SECTION V - That sincerity of desires and endeavors, which, is supposed to excuse in the nonperformance of things in themselves good, particularly considered.

The Arminians insist that though men are unable to perform spiritual duties they ought to be excused because they sincerely desire to do them. Edwards answer is that true sincerity is virtue itself toward God in the soul without any vileness. In such true sincerity one would not be able but to perform the spiritual duties.

SECTION VI - Liberty of Indifference, not only not Necessary to Virtue, but Utterly Inconsistent with it; and all, either Virtuous or Vicious habits or Inclinations, Inconsistent with Arminian Notions of Liberty and Moral Agency.

Arminians suppose that for an action to be virtuous or vicious it must be performed in a state of Liberty. Edwards notes that what follows is an idea that "the heart must be indifferent in time of the performance of that act and the more indifferent and cold the heart is with relation to the act performed, so much the better; because the act is performed with so much greater liberty."³⁵ In addition it will also follow that there is "no virtue in any such habit or qualities as humility, meekness, patience, mercy, gratitude, generosity, heavenly-mindedness; nothing at all praiseworthy in loving Christ

³³ Ibid., 48.

³⁴ Ibid., 50.

³⁵ Ibid., 54.

above (all others)...or delight in holiness, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, love to enemies, universal benevolence to mankind; and on the other hand, there is nothing at all vicious, or worthy of dispraise, in the most sordid, beastly, malignant, devilish dispositions; in being ungrateful, profane, habitually hating God, and things sacred and holy; or in being most treacherous, envious, and cruel towards men. For all these things are dispositions and inclinations of the heart.”³⁶ Such dispositions and inclinations would render actions to be performed in less liberty and therefore according to the Arminians can neither be virtuous or vicious.

SECTION VII - *Arminian Notions of Moral Agency Inconsistent with All Influence of Motive and Inducement, in either Virtuous or Vicious Actions.*

This section is essentially a reiteration of the previous section in more detail. Edwards explains that God has no hand in any man’s virtue, nor does at all promote it, either by a physical or moral influence. Thus the Arminian doctrine charges God with acting in an inconsistent way by using counsels, warnings, invitations, and entreaties with sinners to induce them to forsake sin and turn to the ways of virtue.

PART IV - WHEREIN THE CHIEF GROUNDS OF THE REASONINGS OF ARMINIANS, IN SUPPORT AND DEFENCE OF THE FOREMENTIONED NOTIONS OF LIBERTY, MORAL AGENCY, &c. AND AGAINST THE OPPOSITE DOCTRINE, ARE CONSIDERED

SECTION I - *The Essence of the Virtue and Vice of Dispositions of the Heart and Acts of the Will Lies not in their Cause, but their Nature.*

In this section Edwards qualifies the word “cause.” All wills are caused or authored. Yet blameworthiness or praiseworthiness is not based upon the cause or authorship but upon the immediate agency in the exercising of an act. Thus, a virtuous or vicious declaration is based upon the nature of the act of the will and not its cause.

SECTION II - *The Falseness and Inconsistence of that Metaphysical Notion of Action and Agency, which seems to be Generally Entertained by the Defenders of the Arminian Doctrine Concerning Liberty, Moral Agency, &c.*

Arminians say unless the soul has a self-determining power, it has no power of action so that the soul’s act are its own. Essentially, the claim is that it is impossible for will to act if it has been acted upon. After showing that using different language such as action, passion, or passivity does not change the issue, Edwards identifies a potential reason why some have thought in such a way about the will. He illustrates that when a particular action is decided in the will it has an effect on external actions (motions of body etc.). The contradictory conclusion the Arminians have made based on that

³⁶ Ibid., 55.

experience is that the will acts in that same internally by acting upon itself so that the will determine what it will to will.

SECTION III - *The Reasons why some think it Contrary to Common Sense, to Suppose those things which are Necessary to be Worthy of either Praise or Blame.*

In this section Edwards surveys five main Arminian arguments concerning the will, which they claim is common sense. First, if it is a natural necessity that men do things against or without their wills they cannot be subject to praise or blame for their actions. Second, the will has nothing to do with the words/phrases must, cannot, cannot help it, cannot avoid it, necessary, unable, impossible, unavoidable, and irresistible. Third, if the will of men is of necessity then it is innocent or blameless. Fourth, men experience a conflict of desires between good and evil, which are both presented to them, thus they should not be blamed. Fifth, the greatness of punishment, eternal burnings in hell etc., does not seem an appropriate punishment if men are only doing things which are necessary.

SECTION IV- *It is Agreeable to Common Sense, and the Natural Notions of Mankind, to Suppose Moral Necessity to be Consistent with Praise and Blame, Reward and Punishment.*

In response to the five claims of common sense from the Arminians, which Edwards surveyed in the previous section, he responds in this section with two main ways. First, he defines blameworthiness. Blameworthiness is “the idea which the common people, through all ages and nation have of faultiness...a person being or doing wrong, with his own will and pleasure...doing wrong as he pleases...his pleasure being wrong...(from) having his heart wrong, and doing wrong from his heart.”³⁷ Thus, common sense most teaches that praise or blame is based upon the actions of good or evil which spring from the strongest inclination of the heart. Second, if necessity is the problem which make a subject unable to be praised or blamed, then an individual can never make an act of the will either good or evil. For the moment one make an act of the will, either good or evil, they have exhibited a necessary inward inclination toward one over the other and whatever the act was, it cannot be praised or blamed because it was made out of necessity. Common sense clearly teaches the opposite, that men are rightly held praiseworthy or blameworthy based upon what act of the will they make out of necessity.

³⁷ Ibid., 65.

SECTION V - *Objections that this Scheme of Necessity Renders All Means and Endeavors for Avoiding Sin, or Obtaining Virtue and Holiness, Vain, and to No Purpose; and that it Makes Men no more than Mere Machines, in Affairs of Morality and Religion, answered.*

Man is completely different than a machine, in that “he has reason and understanding, with a faculty of will...is capable of volition and choice...is guided by the exercise of his understanding; his thoughts and exercises of the mind. He has the liberty to act according to these things and to do what he pleases and is therefore “worthy of praise, esteem, love, and reward; or on the contrary, of disesteem, destestation, indignation, and punishment.”³⁸ The Arminian scheme makes men of less dignity and privilege because in it “machines are guided by an intelligent cause, by the skilful hand of the workman or owner; the will of man is left to the guidance of nothing, but absolute blind contingence.”³⁹

SECTION VI - *Concerning that Objection against the Doctrine which has been Maintained, that it Agrees with the Stoical Doctrine of Fate, and the Opinions of Mr. Hobbes.*

In this section Edwards vehemently rejects any doctrine of fate which renders man to have no kind of liberty, activity, moral agency, no ability of virtue, vice, desire, happiness or benefit. He considers any such doctrine of fate as repugnant and inconsistent with the world in which all things are subject “to the disposal of an intelligent, wise agent, that presides...as the Sovereign Lord of the Universe, governing all thing by proper will, choice, and design, in the exercise of the most perfect liberty conceivable, without subjection to any constraint, or being properly under the power or influence of any thing before, above, or without Himself.” Fate concludes that men have no reason or ability to do anything. On the contrary, Edwards asserts that men have an ability to act and that their actions are not meaningless but purposefully designed by God.

SECTION VII - *Concerning the Necessity of the Divine Will.*

In this section Edwards makes two main points. First, he argues that the will of God necessarily determines all things, otherwise God is dependent upon another greater than Himself. Second, God determines all things by what He sees is best and most fitting according to His infinitely superior wisdom.

SECTION VIII - *Some Further Objections Against the Moral Necessity of God’s Volitions Considered.*

Here Edwards responds to four arguments which intend to conclude that God’s will never prefers to determine one thing above another. The first

³⁸ Ibid., 68.

³⁹ Ibid., 69.

argument is that in infinite time and space God “determined and preferred among various objects, between which there was no preferableness, and absolutely no difference.”⁴⁰ Edwards responds by noting that this argument presupposes an infinite length of time outside of God, which makes something else infinitely greater than God. God’s existence is nothing else but “His immediate, perfect, and invariable possession of the whole of His unlimited life, together at once.”⁴¹

The second argument is God placed in different parts of the world, particles, or atoms of matter, that are perfectly equal and alike. Edwards responds that in order for this argument to work we must assume that all matter is infinitely divisible to the point that there could never be any difference between two things. Edwards also points out that even if God were to make two things perfectly alike, they are still distinguishable from each other and may be made for different ends or purposes.

The third argument is that in the determination of the Divine will, it is “unreasonable to suppose a difference of consequence, or that there is any superior fitness or goodness” in God willing one thing versus another. Edwards responds by noting that the “most minute effects of the Creator’s power, the smallest assignable difference between the things which god has made...(may) influence with very great and important consequences.”⁴²

The fourth argument is that God’s necessary determination “derogates from the freeness of God’s grace and goodness, in choosing the objects of His favour and bounty, and from the obligation upon men to thankfulness for special benefits.”⁴³ Edwards responds in three ways. First, Edwards points out that it “derogates no more from the goodness of God...than to suppose it is determined by chance, and that His favours are bestowed altogether at random, His will being determined by nothing but perfect accident, without any end or design whatsoever.”⁴⁴ Second, Edwards recognizes it is God’s own act which determines the moral quality in an object. Third, Edwards cites 1 Tim 1:15-16, where the apostle clearly does not look upon his election as a diminution of freedom. Fourth, Edwards notes that God’s preferences of choices of one object over another is according to good moral necessity which will come of it.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 72.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 74.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

SECTION IX - *Concerning that Objection Against the Doctrine which has been Maintained, that it makes God the Author of Sin.*

In this section Edwards responds to the charge of God being the author of sin in four ways. First, he establishes that the Arminian scheme does not dismiss them from this charge. Arminians affirm the foreknowledge of God. Thus God foreknew every sin and yet ordered and brought to pass the events in which sin would infallibly follow, Judas being a perfect example of this.

Second, Edwards calls for a clarification of the term “author.” If “author” means the agent, actor or doer of a wicked, sinful thing, then this charge is blasphemy. But, if “author” means the permitter of sin, not hindering it but disposing the state of events where it will surely come about for God’s most excellent ends and purposes, then yes, God is the author of sin. Edwards goes on to cite numerous Scriptures wherein God is the disposer and orderer of sin.

Third, Edwards demonstrates that there is a vast difference between God being the positive agent acting in sin and Him being the producer, ordering events in which sin will come about. He uses an illustration of the sunlight’s absence causing darkness to show this type of difference.

Fourth, Edwards states that it “properly belongs to the supreme and absolute Governor of the universe, to order all important events within His dominion, by His wisdom...the events of the moral world are of the most important kind, such as the moral actions of intelligent creatures, and their consequences.”⁴⁵ In the following pages Edwards explicates the way God governs men through His secret and revealed will. The revealed will is God’s moral law. The secret will is God’s eternal good purposes, wherein He means evil, violation of His moral law, for good (Gen 50:20), like Christ’s crucifixion.

SECTION X - *Concerning Sin’s First Entrance Into the World.*

Here Edwards does not fully explain how sin first entered the world, he makes two clarifications.⁴⁶ Sin did not first come into the world because of some imperfection in the creature, for if it did God would then be the positive cause or agent of sin. The Arminian idea of a contingent self-determining power of man’s will cannot answer the question of how sin first entered the world, since man did not have any imperfection after his first creation.

SECTION XI - *Of a Supposed Inconsistence Between these Principles and God’s Moral Character*

Some suppose that God’s moral character, which makes moral commands, is inconsistent with God’s rewarding and punishing for human acts if those acts are not made in a freedom of the will which is wholly self-determined by the moral agent. Edwards simply surveys what he has already said, that the secret and revealed will of God explains why God may

⁴⁵ Ibid., 77.

⁴⁶ For Edwards treatment of this issue see his book entitled, *Original Sin*.

sometimes command one thing and yet bring about the opposite. In regards to the supposed necessity of a moral agent to be freely self-determined so that it can act in virtuously or viciously, Edwards asks what that notion makes of God who is a moral agent who cannot act viciously. Edwards charges the Arminians with begging the question by first determining that moral agents must necessarily have a freedom of the will to be moral agents.

SECTION XII - Of a Supposed Tendency of these Principles to Atheism and Licentiousness.

In response to the charge of holding a doctrine of the will which leads to Atheism, Edwards responds that he knows not what Atheist is being referred to. He notes that the Stoic philosophers, of whom Arminians have charged that Edwards position agrees with, were theists. He also notes that Epicurus, who has been called “the chief father of Atheism” maintained the doctrine of contingency, which the Arminians propound. Edwards further states that the “doctrine of contingency...maintained by the Arminians (which certainly implies, or infers, that events may come into existence, or begin to be, without dependence on any thing foregoing, as their cause, ground, or reason), takes away all proof of the being of God.”⁴⁷ Thus it is Arminianism which leads to Atheism.

In response to the charge of holding a doctrine of the will which leads to licentiousness Edwards admits that some individuals who have held his position have become licentious. Yet Edwards comments that on the whole, from his perspective, the places where Arminian doctrine of the will has been affirmed there has been a general decline in morality where as the places which have held to the contrary doctrine have been most moved to virtue and religious practice.

SECTION XIII - Concerning that Objection Against the Reasoning, by which the Calvinistic Doctrine is Supposed, that it is Metaphysical and Abstruse.

The Calvinistic doctrine of the will is the notion of the will which Edwards has been arguing for over and against the Arminian idea of a free will. Edwards notes that calling the argument “metaphysical” is merely like saying it is a different language. Furthermore, the will is a metaphysical subject. In regards to the claim that the Calvinistic notion is abstruse, or unintelligible, Edwards once more defines the will explaining how all its choices are caused. He demonstrates the rigorous consistency, intelligibility, and comprehensibility of such a notion of will and asks how the Arminian concept of non-determined determining will can be considered a consistent and intelligible thing.

SECTION XIV - The Conclusion

Edwards notes that many of the points of controversy between the Arminians and the Calvinists revolve around the notion that a freedom of the

⁴⁷ Ibid., 84.

will is requisite to moral agency. Here in the conclusion Edwards shows how each of the five points of Calvinism are rejected by the Arminians because of their notion of a free will. He points out that the reason Arminians reject the Calvinistic doctrine of total depravity and corruption of man's nature is because such a doctrine would render one's will unfree. Edwards shows how the Calvinistic doctrine of efficacious grace is a matter of contention for Arminians because if God's grace is truly effectual, it will overcome all opposition including the will of man. Thus the will cannot be free if grace is effectually given. The Calvinistic doctrine of God's universal, absolute, eternal decree of election is objected to by Arminians because it thus requires a necessity of the acts of the will of moral agents and therefore those cannot be free. From the previous three Calvinistic statements, Edwards says that it will inevitably follow that there was design in Christ's death that it may intend to save particular ones. Lastly, Edwards notes that it will certainly follow that those saints who were totally depraved, yet elected by God, given His efficacious grace, and who received the work of Christ, will certainly and infallibly persevere to the end. Arminians find this repugnant since there is then no possibility for a free will to change such a determination.

Edwards concludes his book with a warning concerning too high a reliance on reason in place of the authority of Scripture. He states, "Some have gone so far as confidently to assert, that if any book which pretends to be Scripture, teaches such doctrines, that alone is sufficient warrant for mankind to reject it, as what cannot be the word of God. Some who have not gone so far, have said, that if the Scripture seems to teach any such doctrines, so contrary to reason, we are obliged to find out some other interpretation of those texts, where such doctrines are exhibited...It would show a truer modesty and humility, if they would more entirely rely on God's wisdom and discernment, who knows infinitely better than we what is agreeable to His own perfections...Indeed it is the glorious argument of the Divinity of the Holy Scriptures, that they teach such doctrines..."⁴⁸

As an appeal to the authority to Scripture over the "wise and great men of the world...and the natural dictates of reason" Edwards final words in *Freedom of the Will* are the words of 1 Corinthians 1:19,20; 27-29.

The foolishness of God is wiser than men. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; I will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this world? Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty; and the base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to naught things that are: that no flesh should glory in His presence.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 89.

III. An Explanatory Summary of Edwards' Thought on the Will

A. The Definition of "Will"

The faculty of the *Will*, is that power, or principle of mind, by which it is capable of *choosing*: an act of the *Will* is the same as an act of choosing or choice.

B. The Acts of the Will are Caused

Since there is an effect of every willing act there must be a cause which determines it.

C. The Causes of the Acts of the Will

1. Motive

What determines the will is the motive which is strongest in one's mind. Motive is whatever moves or invites the mind to act of will.

2. Pleasure

The will always acts toward the greatest apparent good. "Good" is what appears agreeable or seems pleasing to the mind. Things that make something appear agreeable may be beauty and/or future consequence(s), which may be desirable or non-desirable.

3. Previous acts of the will

There is a chain of cause and effect relationships between all actions of the will going back through time which influence every act of the will.

4. God

God causes the first act of the will, which effects all of its subsequent acts. God is a moral agent yet God's will is uncaused, for God by nature or by definition is the uncaused cause.⁴⁹

D. The Effects of the Acts of the Will

1. Subsequent acts of the will are influenced.

Every act made out of the will determines what the will's following acts will be.

2. Praise or blame is incurred.

Every act of the will, particularly acts of the will with a moral quality, are praiseworthy or blameworthy.

⁴⁹ Based on Edwards use of the cosmological argument for the existence of God.

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