

Freedom of the Will

[Jonathan Edwards](#)

Part II.

**WHEREIN IT IS CONSIDERED WHETHER THERE IS OR CAN BE ANY 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 4.

**Whether Volition can arise without a Cause, through the activity of the nature of
the soul.**

The author of the Essay on the Freedom of the Will in God and the Creatures, in answer to that objection against his doctrine of a self-determining power in the will, (p. 68 – 69.) That nothing is, or comes to pass, without a sufficient reason why it is, and why it is in this manner rather than another, allows that it is thus in corporeal things, which are, properly and philosophically speaking, passive being; but denies it is thus in spirits, which are beings of an active nature, who have the spring of action within themselves, and can determine themselves. By which it is plainly supposed, that such an event as an act of the Will, may come to pass in a spirit, without a sufficient reason why it comes to pass, or why it is after this manner, rather than another. But certainly this author, in this matter, must be very unwary and inadvertent. For,

1. The objection or difficulty proposed by him seems to be forgotten in his answer or solution. The very difficulty, as he himself proposes it, is this: How an event can come to pass without a sufficient reason why it is, or why it is in this manner rather than another? Instead of solving this difficulty, with regard to Volition, as he proposes, he forgets himself, and answers another question quite diverse, viz. What is a sufficient reason why it is, and why it is in this manner rather than another! And he assigns the active being's own determination as the Cause, and a Cause sufficient for the effect; and leaves all the difficulty unresolved, even, How the soul's own determination, which he speaks of, came to exist, and to be what it was, without a Cause? 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; which is the thing this author supposes concerning acts of the Will. Activity of nature will no more enable a being to produce effects, and determine the manner of their existence, within itself, without a Cause, than out of itself, in some other being. But if an active being should, through its activity,

produce and determine an effect in some external object, how absurd would it be to say, that the effect was produced without a Cause!

2. The question is not so much, How a spirit endowed with activity comes to act, as why it exerts such an act, and not another; or why it acts with such a particular determination? If activity of nature be the Cause why a spirit (the soul of man, for instance) acts, and does not lie still; yet that alone is not the Cause why its action is thus and thus limited, directed, and determined. Active nature is a general thing; it is an ability or tendency of nature to action, generally taken; which may be a Cause why the soul acts as occasion or reason is given; but this alone cannot be a sufficient Cause why the soul exerts such a particular act, at such a time, rather than others. In order to this there must be something besides a general tendency to action; there must also be a particular tendency to that individual action.—If it should be asked, why the soul of man uses its activity, in such a manner as it does; and it should be answered, that the soul uses its activity thus, rather than otherwise, because it has activity; would such an answer satisfy a rational man? Would it not rather be looked upon as a very impertinent one?

3. An active being can bring no effects to pass by his activity, but what are consequent upon his acting: he produces nothing by his activity, any other way than by the exercise of his activity, and so nothing but the fruits of its exercise: he brings nothing to pass by a dormant activity. But the exercise of his activity is action; and so his action, or exercise of his activity, must be prior to the effects of his activity. If an active being produces an effect in another being, about which his activity is conversant, the effect being the fruit of his activity, his activity must be first exercised or exerted, and the effect of it must follow. So it must be, with equal reason, if the active being is his own object, and his activity is conversant about himself, to produce and determine some effect in himself; still the exercise of his activity must go before the effect, which he brings to pass and determines by it. And therefore his activity cannot be the Cause of the determination of the first action, or exercise of activity itself, whence the effects of activity arise; for that would imply a contradiction; it would be to say, the first exercise of activity is before the first exercise of activity, and is the Cause of it.

4. That the soul, though an active substance, cannot diversify its own acts, but by first acting; or be a determining Cause of different acts, or any different effects, sometimes of one kind, and sometimes of another, any other way than in consequence of its own diverse acts, is manifest by this; that if so, then the same Cause, the same causal influence, without variation in any respect, would produce different effects at different times. For the same substance of the soul before it acts, and the same active nature of the soul before it is exerted, i. e. before in the order of nature, would be the Cause of different effects, viz. different Volitions at different times. But the substance of the soul before it acts, and its active nature before it is exerted, are the same without variation. For it is some act that makes the first variation in the Cause, as to any causal exertion, force, or influence. But if it be so, that the soul has no different causality, or diverse causal influence, in producing these diverse effects; then it is evident, that the soul has no influence in the diversity of the effect; and that the difference of the effect cannot be

owing to any thing in the soul; or which is the same thing, the soul does not determine the diversity of the effect; which is contrary to the supposition.— It is true, the substance of the soul before it acts, and before there is any difference in that respect, may be in a different state and circumstances: but those whom I oppose, will not allow the different circumstances of the soul to be the determining Causes of the acts of the will; as being contrary to their notion of self-determination.

5. Let us suppose, as these divines do, that there are no acts of the soul, strictly speaking, but free Volitions; then it will follow, that the soul is an active being in nothing further than it is a voluntary or elective being; and when ever it produces effects actively, it produces effects voluntarily and electively. But to produce effects thus, is the same thing as to produce effects in consequence of, and according to its own choice. And if so, then surely the soul does not by its activity produce all its own acts of will or choice themselves; for this, by the supposition, is to produce all its free acts of choice voluntarily and electively or in consequence of its own free acts of choice, which brings the matter directly to the aforementioned contradiction, of a free act of choice before the first free act of choice.— According to these gentlemen's own notion of action, if there arises in the mind a Volition without a free act of the Will to produce it, the mind is not the voluntary Cause of that Volition; because it does not arise from, nor is regulated by, choice or design. And therefore it cannot be, that the mind should be the active, voluntary, determining Cause of the first and leading Volition that relates to the affair.— The mind being a designing Cause, only enables it to produce effects in consequence of its design; it will not enable it to be the designing Cause of all its own designs. The mind being an elective Cause, will enable it to produce effects only in consequence of its elections, and according to them; but cannot enable it to be the elective Cause of all its own elections; because that supposes an election before the first election. So the mind being an active Cause enables it to produce effects in consequence of its own acts, but cannot enable it to be the determining Cause of all its own acts; for that is, in the same manner, a contradiction; as it supposes a determining act conversant about the first act, and prior to it, having a causal influence on its existence, and manner of existence.

I can conceive of nothing else that can be meant by the soul having power to cause and determine its own Volitions, as a being to whom God has given a power of action, but this; that God has given power to the soul, sometimes at least, to excite Volitions at its pleasure, or according as it chooses. And this certainly supposes, in all such cases, a choice preceding all Volitions which are thus caused, even the first of them. Which runs into the aforementioned great absurdity.

Therefore the activity of the nature of the soul affords no relief from the difficulties with which the notion of a self-determining power in the Will is attended, nor will it help, in the least, its absurdities and inconsistencies.

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