

## 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 6.

**Concerning the Will determining in things which are perfectly indifferent in the  
view of the mind.**

A Great argument for self-determining power, is the supposed experience we universally have of an ability to determine our Wills, in cases wherein no prevailing motive is presented: the Will, as is supposed, has its choice to make between two or more things, that are perfectly equal in the view of the mind; and the Will is apparently, altogether indifferent; and yet we find no difficulty in coming to a choice; the Will can instantly determine itself to one, by a sovereign power which it has over itself, without being moved by any preponderating inducement.

Thus the fore-mentioned author of an Essay on the Freedom of the will, &c. (p. 25, 26, 27.) supposes, "That there are many instances, wherein the will is determined neither by present uneasiness, nor by the greatest apparent good, nor by the last dictate of the understanding, nor by any thing else, but merely by itself, as a sovereign self-determining power of the soul; and that the soul does not will this or that action, in some cases, by any other influence but because it will. Thus, says he, I can turn my face to the south, or the north; I can point with my finger upward, or downward.— And thus, in some cases, the will determines itself in a very sovereign manner, because it will, without a reason borrowed from the understanding: and hereby it discovers its own perfect power of choice, rising from within itself, and free from all influence or restraint of any kind." And (p. 66, 70, 73, 74.) this author very expressly supposes the will in many cases to be determined by no motive at all, and acts altogether without motive, or ground of preference.— Here I would observe:

1. The very supposition which is here made, directly contradicts and overthrows itself. For the thing supposed, wherein this grand argument consists, is, that among several things the Will actually chooses one before another, at the same time that it is perfectly indifferent; which is the very same thing as to say, the mind has a preference, at the

same time that it has no preference. What is meant cannot be, that the mind is indifferent before it comes to have a choice, or until it has a preference; for certainly this author did not imagine he had a controversy with any person in supposing this. Besides, it appears in fact, that the thing which he supposes, is — not that the Will chooses one thing before another, concerning which it is indifferent before it chooses, but that the Will is indifferent when it chooses; and that it being otherwise than indifferent is not until afterwards, in consequence of its choice; that the chosen thing appearing preferable, and more agreeable than another, arises from its choice already made. His words are, (p. 30.) “Where the objects which are proposed appear equally fit or good, the will is left without a guide or director; and therefore must take its own choice, by its own determination; it being properly a self-determining power. And in such cases the Will does as it were make a good to itself by its own choice, i. e. creates its own pleasure or delight in this self-chosen good. Even as a man by seizing upon a spot of unoccupied land, in an uninhabited country, makes it his own possession and property, and as such rejoices in it. Where things were indifferent before, the Will finds nothing to make them more agreeable, considered merely in themselves, but the pleasure it feels arising from its own choice, and its perseverance therein. We love many things which we have chosen, and purely because we chose them.”

This is as much as to say, that we first begin to prefer many things, purely because we have preferred and chosen them before.— These things must needs be spoken inconsiderately by this author. Choice or preference cannot be before itself in the same instance, either in the order of time or nature: It cannot be the foundation of itself, or the consequence of itself. The very act of choosing one thing rather than another, is preferring that thing, and that is setting a higher value on that thing. But that the mind sets a higher value on one thing than another, is not, in the first place, the fruit of its setting a higher value on that thing.

This author says, (p. 36.) “The Will may be perfectly indifferent, and yet the Will may determine itself to choose one or the other.” And again, in the same page, “I am entirely indifferent to either; and yet my Will may determine itself to choose.” And again, “Which I shall choose must be determined by the mere act of my will.” If the choice is determined by a mere act of Will, then the choice is determined by a mere act of choice. And concerning this matter, viz. That the act of the Will itself is determined by act of choice, this writer is express. (p. 72.) Speaking of the case, where there is no superior fitness in objects presented, he has these words: “There it must act by its own choice, and determine itself as it PLEASES.” Where it is supposed that the very determination, which is the ground and spring of the will’s act, is an act of choice and pleasure, wherein one act is more agreeable than another: and this preference and superior pleasure is the ground of all it does in the case. And if so, the mind is not indifferent when it determines itself, but had rather determine itself one way than another. And therefore the Will does not act at all in indifference; not so much as in the first step it takes. If it be possible for the understanding to act in indifference, yet surely the will never does; because the will beginning to act is the very same thing as it beginning to choose or prefer. And if in the very first act of the Will, the mind prefers something, then the idea of that thing preferred, does at that time preponderate, or prevail in the mind:

or, which is the same thing, the idea of it has a prevailing influence on the Will. So that this wholly destroys the thing supposed, viz. That the mind can by a sovereign power choose one of two or more things, which in the view of the mind are, in every respect, perfectly equal, one of which does not at all preponderate, nor has any prevailing influence on the mind above another.

So that this author, in his grand argument for the ability of the Will to choose one of two or more things, concerning which it is perfectly indifferent, does at the same time, in effect, deny the thing he supposes, even that the Will, in choosing, is subject to no prevailing influence of the view of the thing chosen. And indeed it is impossible to offer this argument without overthrowing it; the thing supposed in it being that which denies itself. To suppose the Will to act at all in a state of perfect indifference, is to assert that the mind chooses without choosing. To say that when it is indifferent, it can do as it pleases, is to say that it can follow its pleasure, when it has no pleasure to follow. And therefore if there be any difficulty in the instances of two cakes, or two eggs, &c. which are exactly alike, one as good as another; concerning which this author supposes the mind in fact has a choice, and so in effect supposes that it has a preference; it as much concerned himself to solve the difficulty, as it does those whom he opposes. For if these instances prove any thing to his purpose, they prove that a man chooses without choice. And yet this is not to his purpose; because if this is what he asserts, his own words are as much against him, and does as much contradict him, as the words of those he disputes against can do.

2. There is no great difficulty in showing, in such instances as are alleged, not only that it must needs be so, that the mind must be influenced in its choice by something that has a preponderating influence upon it, but also how it is so. A little attention to our own experience, and a distinct consideration of the acts of our own minds, in such cases, will be sufficient to clear up the matter.

Thus, supposing I have a chess-board before me; and because I am required by a superior, or desired by a friend, or on some other consideration, I am determined to touch some one of the spots or squares on the board with my finger. Not being limited or directed, in the first proposal, to any one in particular; and there being nothing in the squares, in themselves considered, that recommends any one of all the sixty-four, more than another; in this case, my mind determines to give itself up to what is vulgarly called accident, by determining to touch that square which happens to be most in view, which my eye is especially upon at that moment, or which happens to be then most in my mind, or which I shall be directed to by some other such like accident. Here are several steps of the mind proceeding (though all may be done, as it were, in a moment). The first step is its general determination that it will touch one of the squares. The next step is another general determination to give itself up to accident, in some certain way; as to touch that which shall be most in the eye or mind at that time, or to some other such like accident. The third and last step is a particular determination to touch a certain individual spot, even that square, which, by that sort of accident the mind has pitched upon, has actually offered itself beyond others. Now it is apparent that in none of these several steps does the mind proceed in absolute indifference, but in each of them is

influenced by a preponderating inducement. So it is in the first step, the mind's general determination to touch one of the sixty-four spots: the mind is not absolutely indifferent whether it does so or no; it is induced to it, for the sake of making some experiment, or by the desire of a friend, or some other motive that prevails. So it is in the second step, the mind determining to give itself up to accident, by touching that which shall be most in the eye, or the idea of which shall be most prevalent in the mind, &c. The mind is not absolutely indifferent whether it proceeds by this rule or no; but chooses it, because it appears at that time a convenient and requisite expedient in order to fulfil the general purpose. And so it is in the third and last step, which is determining to touch that individual spot which actually does prevail in the mind's view. The mind is not indifferent concerning this; but is influenced by a prevailing inducement and reason; which is, that this is a prosecution of the preceding determination, which appeared requisite, and was fixed before in the second step.

Accident will ever serve a man, without hindering him a moment, in such a case. Among a number of objects in view, one will prevail in the eye, or in idea, beyond others. When we have our eyes open in the clear sunshine, many objects strike the eye at once, and innumerable images may be at once painted in it by the rays of light; but the attention of the mind is not equal to several of them at once; or if it be, it does not continue so for any time. And so it is with respect to the ideas of the mind in general: several ideas are not in equal strength in the mind's view and notice at once; or at least, does not remain so for any sensible continuance. There is nothing in the world more constantly varying, than the ideas of the mind; they do not remain precisely in the same state for the least perceivable space of time; as is evident by this: — That all time is perceived by the mind, only by the successive changes of its own ideas. Therefore while the perceptions of the mind remain precisely in the same state, there is no perceivable length of time, because no sensible succession at all.

As the acts of the Will, in each step of the aforementioned procedure, do not come to pass without a particular cause, but every act is owing to a prevailing inducement; so the accident, as I have called it, or that which happens in the unsearchable course of things, to which the mind yields itself, and by which it is guided, is not any thing that comes to pass without a cause. The mind in determining to be guided by it, is not determined by something that has no cause; any more than if it be determined to be guided by a lot, or the casting of a die. For though the die falling in such a manner be accidental to him that casts it, yet none will suppose that there is no cause why it falls as it does. The involuntary changes in the succession of our ideas, though the cause may not be observed, have as much a cause, as the changeable motions of the motes that float in the air, or the continual, infinitely various, successive changes of the unevennesses on the surface of the water.

There are two things especially, which are probably the occasions of confusion in the minds of them who insist upon it, that the Will acts in a proper indifference, and without being moved by any inducement, in its determinations in such cases as have been mentioned.

1. They seem to mistake the point in question, or at least not to keep it distinctly in view. The question they dispute about, is, Whether the mind be indifferent about the objects presented, one of which is to be taken, touched, pointed to, &c. as two eggs, two cakes, which appear equally good. Whereas the question to be considered, is, Whether the person be indifferent with respect to his own actions; whether he does not, on some consideration or other, prefer one act with respect to these objects before another. The mind in its determination and choice, in these cases, is not most immediately and directly conversant about the objects presented; but the acts to be done concerning these objects. The objects may appear equal, and the mind may never properly make any choice between them; but the next act of the Will being about the external actions to be performed, taking, touching, &c. these may not appear equal, and one action may properly be chosen before another. In each step of the mind's progress, the determination is not about the objects, unless indirectly and improperly, but about the actions, which it chooses for other reasons than any preference of the objects, and for reasons not taken at all from the objects.

There is no necessity of supposing, that the mind does ever at all properly choose one of the objects before another: either before it has taken, or afterwards. Indeed the man chooses to take or touch one rather than another; but not because it chooses the thing taken, or touched, but from foreign considerations. The case may be so, that of two things offered, a man may, for certain reasons, prefer taking that which he undervalues, and choose to neglect that which his mind prefers. In such a case, choosing the thing taken, and choosing to take, are diverse: and so they are in a case where the things presented are equal in the mind's esteem, and neither of them preferred. All that fact and experience makes evident, is, that the mind chooses one action rather than another. And therefore the arguments which they bring, in order to be to their purpose, should be to prove that the mind chooses the action in perfect indifference, with respect to that action; and not to prove that the mind chooses the action in perfect indifference with respect to the object; which is very possible, and yet the Will not act at all without prevalent inducement, and proper preponderation.

2. Another reason of confusion and difficulty in this matter, seems to be, not distinguishing between a general indifference, or an indifference with respect to what is to be done in a more distant and general view of it, and a particular indifference, or an indifference with respect to the next immediate act, viewed with its particular and present circumstances. A man may be perfectly indifferent with respect to his own actions, in the former respect; and yet not in the latter. Thus in the foregoing instance of touching one of the squares of a chess-board; when it is first proposed that I should touch one of them, I may be perfectly indifferent which I touch; because as yet I view the matter remotely and generally, being but in the first step of the mind's progress in the affair. But yet, when I am actually come to the last step, and the very next thing to be determined is which, is to be touched, having already determined that I will touch that which happens to be most in my eye or mind, and my mind being now fixed on a particular one, the act of touching that, considered thus immediately, and in these particular present circumstances, is not what my mind is absolutely indifferent about.

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