

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 7.

Concerning the Notion of Liberty of Will, Consisting in Indifference.

What has been said in the foregone section, has a tendency in some measure to evince the absurdity of the opinion of such as place Liberty in Indifference, or in that equilibrium whereby the will is without all antecedent bias; that the determination of the Will to either side may be entirely from itself, and that it may be owing only to its own power, and the sovereignty which it has over itself, that it goes this way rather than that.

But inasmuch as this has been of such long standing, and has been so generally received, and so much insisted on by Pelagians, Semi-Pelagians, Jesuits, Socinians, Arminians, and others, it may deserve a more full consideration. And therefore I shall now proceed to a more particular and thorough inquiry into this notion.

Now lest some should suppose that I do not understand those that place Liberty in Indifference, or should charge me with misrepresenting their opinion, I would signify, that I am sensible, there are some, who, when they talk of Liberty of the Will as consisting in Indifference, express themselves as though they would not be understood to mean the Indifference of the inclination or tendency of the Will, but an Indifference of the soul's power, of willing; or that the will, with respect to its power or ability to choose, is indifferent, can go either way indifferently, either to the right hand or left, either act or forbear to act, one as well as the other. This indeed seems to be a refining of some particular writers only, and newly invented, which will by no means consist with the manner of expression used by the defenders of Liberty of Indifference in general. I wish such refiners would thoroughly consider, whether they distinctly know their own meaning, when they make a distinction between an Indifference of the soul as to its power or ability of choosing, and the soul's Indifference as to the preference or choice itself; and whether they do not deceive themselves in imagining that they have any distinct meaning at all. The Indifference of the soul as to its ability or power to will, must be the same thing as the Indifference of the state of the power or faculty of the will, or

the indifference of the state which the soul itself, which has that power or faculty, hitherto remains in, as to the exercise of that power, in the choice it shall by and by make.

But not to insist any longer on the inexplicable abstruseness of this distinction; let what will be supposed concerning the meaning of them that use it, this much must at least be intended by Arminians when they talk of Indifference as essential to Liberty of Will, if they intend any thing, in any respect to their purpose, viz. That it is such an Indifference as leaves the will not determined already; but free from actual possession, and vacant of predetermination, so far, that there may be room for the exercise of the self-determining power of the Will; and that the Will's freedom consists in, or depends upon, this vacancy and opportunity that is left for the will itself to be the determiner of the act that is to be the free act.

And here I would observe in the first place, that to make out this scheme of Liberty, the Indifference must be perfect and absolute; there must be a perfect freedom from all antecedent preponderation or inclination. Because if the Will be already inclined, before it exerts its own sovereign power on itself, then its inclination is not wholly owing to itself: if when two opposites are proposed to the soul for its choice, the proposal does not find the soul wholly in a state of Indifference, then it is not found in a state of Liberty for mere self-determination.— The least degree of an antecedent bias must be inconsistent with their notion of liberty. For so long as prior inclination possesses the will, and is not removed, the former binds the latter, so that it is utterly impossible that the Will should act otherwise than agreeably to it. Surely the Will cannot act or choose contrary to a remaining prevailing inclination of the Will. To suppose otherwise, would be the same thing as to suppose that the Will is inclined contrary to its present prevailing inclination, or contrary to what it is inclined to. That which the will prefers, to that, all things considered, it preponderates and inclines. It is equally impossible for the Will to choose contrary to its own remaining and present preponderating inclination, as it is to prefer contrary to its own present preference, or choose contrary to its own present choice. The Will, therefore, so long as it is under the influence of an old preponderating inclination, is not at Liberty for a new free act; or any, that shall now be an act of self-determination. That which is a self-determined free act, must be one which the will determines in the possession and use of a peculiar sort of liberty; such as consists in a freedom from every thing, which, if it were there, would make it impossible that the Will, at that time, should be otherwise than that way to which it tends.

If any one should say, there is no need that the Indifference should be perfect; but although a former inclination still remains, yet, if it be not very strong, possibly the strength of the Will may oppose and overcome it:— This is grossly absurd; for the strength of the will, let it be never so great, gives it no such sovereignty and command, as to cause itself to prefer and not to prefer at the same time, or to choose contrary to its own present choice.

Therefore, if there be the least degree of antecedent preponderation of the Will, it must be perfectly abolished, before the Will can be at liberty to determine itself the contrary

way. And if the Will determines itself the same way, it was not a free determination, because the Will is not wholly at liberty in so doing; its determination is not altogether from itself, but it was partly determined before, in its prior inclination: and all the freedom the will exercises in the case, is in an increase of inclination, which it gives itself, added to what it had by a foregoing bias; so much is from itself, and so much is from perfect indifference. For though the Will had a previous tendency that way, yet as to that additional degree of inclination, it had no tendency. Therefore the previous tendency is of no consideration, with respect to the act wherein the will is free. So that it comes to the same thing which was said at first, that as to the act of the will, wherein the will is free, there must be perfect indifference, or equilibrium.

To illustrate this: suppose a sovereign self-moving power in a natural body; but that the body is in motion already, by an antecedent bias; for instance, gravitation towards the centre of the earth; and has one degree of motion by virtue of that previous tendency; but by its self-moving power it adds one degree more to its motion, and moves so much more swiftly towards the centre of the earth than it would do by its gravity only: it is evident, all that is owing to a self-moving power in this case, is the additional degree of motion; and that the other degree which it had from gravity, is of no consideration in the case; the effect is just the same, as if the body had received from itself one degree of motion from a state of perfect rest. So, if we suppose a self-moving power given to the scale of a balance, which has a weight of one degree beyond the opposite scale; and if we ascribe to it an ability to add to itself another degree of force the same way, by its self-moving power; this is just the same thing as to ascribe to it a power to give itself one degree of preponderation from a perfect equilibrium; and so much power as the scale has to give itself an over-balance from a perfect equipoise, so much self-moving self-preponderating power it has, and no more. So that its free power this way is always to be measured from perfect equilibrium.

I need say no more to prove, that if Indifference be essential to liberty, it must be perfect Indifference; and that so far as the will is destitute of this, so far is it destitute of that freedom by which it is in a capacity of being its own determiner, without being at all passive, or subject to the power and sway of something else, in its motions and determinations.

Having observed these things, let us now try whether this notion of the Liberty of Will consisting in Indifference and equilibrium, and the Will's self-determination in such a state, be not absurd and inconsistent.

Now the question is, whether ever the soul of man puts forth an act of Will, while it yet remains in a state of Liberty, viz. as implying a state of Indifference; or whether the soul ever exerts an act of preference, while at that very time the Will is in a perfect equilibrium, not inclining one way more than another. The very putting of the question is sufficient to show the absurdity of the affirmative answer: for how ridiculous would it be for any body to insist, that the soul chooses one thing before another, when at the very same instant it is perfectly indifferent with respect to each! This is the same thing as to say, the soul prefers one thing to another, at the very same time that it has no

preference.—Choice and preference can no more be in a state of Indifference, than motion can be in a state of rest, or than the preponderation of the scale of a balance can be in a state of equilibrium. Motion may be the next moment after rest; but cannot co-exist with it, in any, even the least, part of it. So choice may be immediately after a state of Indifference, but cannot co-exist with it: even the very beginning of it is not in a state of Indifference. And therefore, if this be Liberty, no act of the Will, in any degree, is ever performed in a state of Liberty, or in the time of Liberty. Volition and Liberty are so far from agreeing together, and being essential one to another, that they are contrary one to another, and one excludes and destroys the other, as much as motion and rest, light and darkness, or life and death. So that the Will acts not at all, does not so much as begin to act, in the time of such Liberty: freedom has ceased to be, at the first moment of action; and therefore Liberty cannot reach the action, to affect, or qualify it, or give it a denomination, any more than if it had ceased to be twenty years before the action began. The moment that Liberty ceases to be, it ceases to be a qualification of any thing. If light and darkness succeed one another instantaneously, light qualifies nothing after it is gone out, to make any thing lightsome or bright, at the first moment of perfect darkness, any more than months or years after. Life denominates nothing vital, at the first moment of perfect death. So freedom, if it consists in or implies Indifference, can denominate nothing free, at the first moment of preference or preponderation. Therefore it is manifest, that no Liberty which the soul is possessed of, or ever uses, in any of its acts of volition, consists in Indifference; and that the opinion of such as suppose, that Indifference belongs to the very essence of Liberty, is to the highest degree absurd and contradictory.

If any one should imagine, that this manner of arguing is nothing but a trick and delusion; and to evade the reasoning, should say, that the thing wherein the Will exercises its Liberty, is not in the act of choice or preponderation itself, but in determining itself to a certain choice or preference; that the act of the Will wherein it is free, and uses its own sovereignty, consists in its causing or determining the change or transition from a state of indifference to a certain preference or determining to give a certain turn to the balance, which has hitherto been even; and that the Will exerts this act in a state of Liberty, or while the Will yet remains in equilibrium, and perfect master of itself.—I say, if any one chooses to express his notion of Liberty after this, or some such manner, let us see if he can succeed any better than before.

What is asserted is, that the Will, while it yet remains in perfect equilibrium, without preference, determines to change itself from that state, and excite in itself a certain choice or preference. Now let us see whether this does not come to the same absurdity we had before. If it be so that the Will, while it yet remains perfectly indifferent, determines to put itself out of that state, and to give itself a certain preponderation; then I would inquire, whether the soul does not determine this of choice; or whether the Will coming to a determination to do so, be not the same thing as the soul coming to a choice to do so. If the soul does not determine this of choice, or in the exercise of choice, then it does not determine it voluntarily. And if the soul does not determine it voluntarily, or of its own will, then in what sense does its Will determine it? And if the Will does not determine it, then how is the Liberty of the Will exercised in the

determination? What sort of Liberty is exercised by the soul in those determinations, wherein there is no exercise of choice, which are not voluntary, and wherein the Will is not concerned? But if it be allowed, that this determination is an act of choice, and it be insisted on, that the soul, while it yet remains in a state of perfect Indifference, chooses to put itself out of that state, and to turn itself one way; then the soul is already come to a choice; and chooses that way. And so we have the very same absurdity which we had before. Here is the soul in a state of choice, and in a state of equilibrium, both at the same time: the soul already choosing one way, while it remains in a state of perfect Indifference, and has no choice of one way more than the other.— And indeed this manner of talking, though it may a little hide the absurdity, in the obscurity of expression, increases the inconsistency. To say, the free act of the Will, or the act which the will exerts in a state of freedom and Indifference, does not imply preference in it, but is what the will does in order to cause or produce a preference, is as much as to say, the soul chooses (for to will and to choose are the same thing) without choice, and prefers without preference, in order to cause or produce the beginning of a preference, or the first choice. And that is, that the first choice is exerted without choice, in order to produce itself!

If any, to evade these things, should own, that a state of liberty and a state of Indifference are not the same, and that the former may be without the latter; but should say, that Indifference is still essential to freedom, as it is necessary to go immediately before it; it being essential to the freedom of an act of Will that it should directly and immediately arise out of a state of Indifference; still this will not help the cause of Arminian Liberty, or make it consistent with itself. For if the act springs immediately out of a state of Indifference, then it does not arise from antecedent choice or preference. But if the act arises directly out of a state of Indifference, without any intervening choice to determine it, then the act not being determined by choice, is not determined by the will; the mind exercises no free choice in the affair, and free choice and free will have no hand in the determination of the act. Which is entirely inconsistent with their notion of the freedom of volition.

If any should suppose, that these absurdities may be avoided, by saying, that the Liberty of the mind consists in a power to suspend the act of the will, and so to keep it in a state of Indifference, until there has been opportunity for consideration; and so shall say, that however Indifference is not essential to Liberty in such a manner, that the mind must make its choice in a state of Indifference, which is an inconsistency, or that the act of will must spring immediately out of Indifference; yet Indifference may be essential to the Liberty of acts of the Will in this respect; viz, That Liberty consists in a power of the mind to forbear or suspend the act of volition, and keep the mind in a state of Indifference for the present, until there has been opportunity for proper deliberation: I say, if any one imagines that this helps the matter, it is a great mistake: it reconciles no inconsistency, and relieves no difficulty.— For here the following things must be observed:

1. That this suspending of volition, if there be properly any such thing, is itself an act of volition. If the mind determines to suspend its act, it determines it voluntarily; it chooses,

on some consideration, to suspend it. And this choice or determination, is an act of the Will: And indeed it is supposed to be so in the very hypothesis; for it is supposed that the Liberty of the Will consists in its power to do this, and that its doing it is the very thing wherein the Will exercises its Liberty. But how can the Will exercise Liberty in it, if it be not an act of the Will? The Liberty of the Will is not exercised in any thing but what the Will does.

2. This determining to suspend acting is not only an act of the will, but it is supposed to be the only free act of the Will; because it is said, that this is the thing wherein the Liberty of the Will consists.— If so, then this is all the act of Will that we have to consider in this controversy. And now, the former question returns upon us; viz. Wherein consists the freedom of the will in those acts wherein it is free? And if this act of determining a suspension be the only act in which the Will is free, then wherein consists the Will's freedom with respect to this act of suspension? And how is Indifference essential to this act? The answer must be, according to what is supposed in the evasion under consideration, that the liberty of the Will in this act of suspension, consists in a power to suspend even this act, until there has been opportunity for thorough deliberation. But this will be to plunge directly into the grossest nonsense: for it is the act of suspension itself that we are speaking of; and there is no room for a space of deliberation and suspension in order to determine whether we will suspend or no. For that supposes, that even suspension itself may be deferred: which is absurd; for the very deferring the determination of suspension, to consider whether we will suspend or no, will be actually suspending. For during the space of suspension, to consider whether to suspend, the act is, ipso facto, suspended. There is no medium between suspending to act, and immediately acting; and therefore no possibility of avoiding either the one or the other one moment.

And besides, this is attended with ridiculous absurdity another way: for now, it seems, Liberty consists wholly in the mind having power to suspend its determination whether to suspend or no; that there may be time for consideration, whether it be best to suspend. And if Liberty consists in this only, then this is the Liberty under consideration. We have to inquire now, how Liberty, with respect to this act of suspending a determination of suspension, consists in Indifference, or how Indifference is essential to it. The answer, according to the hypothesis we are upon, must be, that it consists in a power of suspending even this last-mentioned act, to have time to consider whether to suspend that. And then the same difficulties and inquiries return over again with respect to that; and so on for ever. Which, if it would show any thing, would show only that there is no such thing as a free act. It drives the exercise of freedom back in infinitum; and that is to drive it out of the world.

And besides all this, there is a delusion, and a latent gross contradiction in the affair another way; inasmuch as in explaining how, or in what respect, the Will is free, with regard to a particular act of volition, it is said, that its Liberty consists in a power to determine to suspend that act, which places Liberty not in that act of volition which the inquiry is about, but altogether in another antecedent act. Which contradicts the thing supposed in both the question and answer. The question is, wherein consists the mind's

liberty in any particular act of volition? And the answer, in pretending to show wherein lies the mind's Liberty in that act, in effect says, it does not lie in that act at all, but in another, viz. a volition to suspend that act. And therefore the answer is both contradictory, and altogether impertinent and beside the purpose. For it does not show wherein the Liberty of the Will consists in the act in question; instead of that, it supposes it does not consist in that act at all, but in another distinct from it, even a volition to suspend that act, and take time to consider of it. And no account is pretended to be given wherein the mind is free with respect to that act, wherein this answer supposes the Liberty of the mind indeed consists, viz. the act of suspension, or of determining the suspension.

On the whole, it is exceeding manifest, that the Liberty of the mind does not consist in Indifference, and that Indifference is not essential or necessary to it, or at all belonging to it, as the Arminians suppose; that opinion being full of nothing but self-contradiction.

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