

## 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 9.

#### **Of the Connexion of the Acts of the Will with the Dictates of the Understanding.**

IT is manifest, that no Acts of the Will are contingent, in such a sense as to be without all necessity, or so as not to be necessary with a necessity of consequence and Connexion; because every Act of the Will is some way connected with the Understanding, and is as the greatest apparent good is, in the manner which has already been explained; namely, that the soul always wills or chooses that which, in the present view of the mind, considered in the whole of that view, and all that belongs to it, appears most agreeable. Because, as was observed before, nothing is more evident than that, when men act voluntarily, and do what they please, then they do what appears most agreeable to them; and to say otherwise, would be as much as to affirm, that men do not choose what appears to suit them best, or what seems most pleasing to them; or that they do not choose what they prefer. Which brings the matter to a contradiction.

And as it is very evident in itself, that the Acts of the will have some connexion with the dictates or views of the understanding, so this is allowed by some of the chief of the Arminian writers; particularly by Dr. Whitby and Dr. Samuel Clark. Dr. Turnbull, though a great enemy to the doctrine of necessity, allows the same thing. In his *Christian Philosophy*, (p. 196.) he with much approbation cites another philosopher, as of the same mind, in these words: "No man (says an excellent philosopher) sets himself about any thing, but upon some view or other, which serves him for a reason for what he does; and whatsoever faculties he employs, the Understanding, with such light as it has, well or ill formed, constantly leads; and by that light, true or false, all her operative powers are directed. The Will itself, how absolute and incontrollable soever it may be thought, never fails in its obedience to the dictates of the understanding. Temples have their sacred images; and we see what influence they have always had over a great part of mankind; but in truth, the ideas and images in men's minds are the invisible powers that constantly govern them; and to these they all pay universally a ready submission."

But whether this be in a just consistence with themselves, and their own notions of liberty, I desire may now be impartially considered.

Dr. Whitby plainly supposes, that the acts and determinations of the Will always follow the understanding's view of the greatest good to be obtained, or evil to be avoided; or, in other words, that the determinations of the Will constantly and infallibly follow these two things in the Understanding: 1. The degree of good to be obtained, and evil to be avoided, proposed to the understanding, and apprehended, viewed, and taken notice of by it. 2. The degree of the understanding's apprehension of that good or evil; which is increased by attention and consideration. That this is an opinion in which he is exceeding peremptory, (as he is in every opinion which he maintains in his controversy with the Calvinists,) with disdain of the contrary opinion, as absurd and self-contradictory, will appear by the following words, in his Discourse on the Five Points.

“Now, it is certain, that what naturally makes the Understanding to perceive, is evidence proposed, and apprehended, considered or adverted to: for nothing else can be requisite to make us come to the knowledge of the truth. Again, what makes the Will choose, is something approved by the Understanding; and consequently appearing to the soul as good. And whatsoever it refuseth, is something represented by the Understanding, and so appearing to the Will, as evil. Whence all that God requires of us is and can be only this; to refuse the evil, and choose the good. Wherefore, to say that evidence proposed, apprehended, and considered, is not sufficient to make the Understanding approve; or that the greatest good proposed, the greatest evil threatened, when equally believed and reflected on, is not sufficient to engage the Will to choose the good and refuse the evil, is in effect to say, that which alone doth move the Will to choose or to refuse, is not sufficient to engage it so to do; which being contradictory to itself, must of necessity be false. Be it then so, that we naturally have an aversion to the truths proposed to us in the gospel; that only can make us indisposed to attend to them, but cannot hinder our conviction, when we do apprehend them, and attend to them.— Be it, that there is in us also a renitency to the good we are to choose; that only can indispose us to believe it is, and to approve it as our chiefest good. Be it, that we are prone to the evil that we should decline; that only can render it the more difficult for us to believe it is the worst of evils. But yet, what we do really believe to be our chiefest good, will still be chosen; and what we apprehend to be the worst of evils, will, whilst we do continue under that conviction be refused by us. It therefore can be only requisite, in order to these ends, that the Good Spirit should so illuminate our Understandings, that we attending to and considering what lies before us, should apprehend and be convinced of our duty; and that the blessings of the gospel should be so propounded to us, as that we may discern them to be our chiefest good; and the miseries it threateneth, so as we may be convinced that they are the worst of evils; that we may choose the one, and refuse the other.”

Here let it be observed, how plainly and peremptorily it is asserted, that the greatest good proposed, and the greatest evil threatened, when equally believed and reflected on, is sufficient to engage the will to choose the good, and refuse the evil, and is that alone which doth move the Will to choose or to refuse; and that it is contradictory to

itself, to suppose otherwise; and therefore must of necessity be false; and then what we do really believe to be our chiefest good will still be chosen, and what we apprehend to be the worst of evils, will, whilst we continue under that conviction, be refused by us. Nothing could have been said more to the purpose, fully to signify, that the determinations of the Will must evermore follow the illumination, conviction, and notice of the Understanding, with regard to the greatest good and evil proposed, reckoning both the degree of good and evil understood, and the degree of Understanding, notice, and conviction of that proposed good and evil; and that it is thus necessarily, and can be otherwise in no instance: because it is asserted, that it implies a contradiction, to suppose it ever to be otherwise.

I am sensible, the Doctor's aim in these assertions is against the Calvinist; to show, in opposition to them, that there is no need of any physical operation of the Spirit of God on the Will, to change and determine that to a good choice, but that God's operation and assistance is only moral, suggesting ideas to the Understanding; which he supposes to be enough, if those ideas are attended to, infallibly to obtain the end. But whatever his design was, nothing can more directly and fully prove, that every determination of the Will, in choosing and refusing, is necessary; directly contrary to his own notion of the liberty of the Will. For if the determination of the Will, evermore, in this manner, follows the light, conviction, and view of the Understanding, concerning the greatest good and evil, and this be that alone which moves the Will, and it be a contradiction to suppose otherwise; then it is necessarily so, the Will necessarily follows this light or view of the understanding, not only in some of its acts, but in every act of choosing and refusing. So that the Will does not determine itself in any one of its own acts; but every act of choice and refusal depends on, and is necessarily connected with, some antecedent cause; which cause is not the Will itself, nor any act of its own, nor any thing pertaining to that faculty, but something belonging to another faculty, whose acts go before the will, in all its acts, and govern and determine them.

Here, if it should be replied, that although it be true, that according to the Doctor, the final determination of the Will always depends upon, and is infallibly connected with, the Understanding's conviction, and notice of the greatest good; yet the Acts of the will are not necessary; because that conviction of the Understanding is first dependent on a preceding Act of the Will, in determining to take notice of the evidence exhibited; by which means the mind obtains that degree of conviction, which is sufficient and effectual to determine the consequent and ultimate choice of the Will; and that the Will, with regard to that preceding act, whereby it determines whether to attend or no, is not necessary; and that in this, the liberty of the Will consists, that when God holds forth sufficient objective light, the Will is at liberty whether to command the attention of the mind to it or not.

Nothing can be more weak and inconsiderate than such a reply as this. For that preceding Act of the Will, in determining to attend and consider, still is an Act of the Will; if the Liberty of the Will consists in it, as is supposed, as if it be an Act of the Will, it is an act of choice or refusal. And therefore, if what the Doctor asserts be true, it is determined by some antecedent light in the Understanding concerning the greatest

apparent good or evil. For he asserts, it is that light which alone doth move the will to choose or refuse. And therefore the Will must be moved by that, in choosing to attend to the objective light offered, in order to another consequent act of choice: so that this act is no less necessary than the other. And if we suppose another Act of the will, still preceding both these mentioned, to determine both, still that also must be an Act of the Will, an act of choice; and so must, by the same principles, be infallibly determined by some certain degree of light in the Understanding concerning the greatest good. And let us suppose as many Acts of the Will, one preceding another, as we please, yet are they every one of them necessarily determined by a certain degree of light in the understanding, concerning the greatest and most eligible good in that case; and so, not one of them free according to Dr. Whitby's notion of freedom. And if it be said, the reason why men do not attend to light held forth, is because of ill habits contracted by evil acts committed before, whereby their minds are indisposed to consider the truth held forth to them, the difficulty is not at all avoided: still the question returns, What determined the Will in those preceding evil acts? It must, by Dr. Whitby's principles, still be the view of the Understanding concerning the greatest good and evil. If this view of the Understanding be that alone which doth move the Will to choose or refuse, as the Doctor asserts, then every act of choice or refusal, from a man's first existence, is moved and determined by this view; and this view of the Understanding exciting and governing the act, must be before the act. And therefore the Will is necessarily determined, in every one of its acts, from a man's first existence, by a cause beside the will, and a cause that does not proceed from or depend on any act of the Will at all. Which at once utterly abolishes the Doctor's whole scheme of Liberty of Will; and he, at one stroke, has cut the sinews of all his arguments from the goodness, righteousness, faithfulness, and sincerity of God, in his commands, promises, threatenings, calls, invitations, and exhortations; which he makes use of, under the heads of reprobation, election, universal redemption, sufficient and effectual grace, and the freedom of the will of man; and has made vain all his exclamations against the doctrine of the Calvinists, as charging God with manifest unrighteousness, unfaithfulness, hypocrisy, fallaciousness, and cruelty.

Dr. Samuel Clark, in his *Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*, to evade the argument to prove the necessity of volition, from its necessary Connexion with the last Dictate of the Understanding, supposes the latter not to be diverse from the Act of the will itself. But if it be so, it will not alter the case as to the necessity of the Act. If the Dictate of the Understanding be the very same with the determination of the Will, as Dr. Clark supposes, then this determination is no fruit or effect of choice; and if so, no liberty of choice has any hand in it: it is necessary; that is, choice cannot prevent it. If the last Dictate of the Understanding be the same with the determination of volition itself, then the existence of that determination must be necessary as to volition; in as much as volition can have no opportunity to determine whether it shall exist or no, it having existence already before volition has opportunity to determine any thing. It is itself the very rise and existence of volition. But a thing after it exists, has no opportunity to determine as to its own existence; it is too late for that.

If liberty consists in that which Arminians suppose, viz. in the will determining its own acts, having free opportunity and being without all necessity; this is the same as to say, that liberty consists in the soul having power and opportunity to have what determinations of the will it pleases. And if the determinations of the Will, and the last Dictates of the Understanding, be the same thing, then liberty consists in the mind having power and opportunity to choose its own Dictates of understanding. But this is absurd; for it is to make the determination of choice prior to the Dictate of Understanding, and the ground of it; which cannot consist with the Dictate of the Understanding being the determination of choice itself.

Here is no alternative, but to recur to the old absurdity of one determination before another, and the cause of it; and another before, determining that; and so on in infinitum. If the last Dictate of the Understanding be the determination of the Will itself, and the soul be free with regard to that Dictate, in the Arminian notion of freedom; then the soul, before that dictate of its Understanding exists, voluntarily and according to its own choice determines, in every case, what that Dictate of the Understanding shall be; otherwise that Dictate, as to the will, is necessary; and the acts determined by it must also be necessary. So that there is a determination of the mind prior to that Dictate of the Understanding, an act of choice going before it, choosing and determining what that Dictate of the Understanding shall be: and this preceding act of choice, being a free Act of Will, must also be the same with another last Dictate of the Understanding: And if the mind also be free in that Dictate of Understanding, that must be determined still by another; and so on for ever.

Besides, if the Dictate of the Understanding, and determination of the will be the same, this confounds the Understanding and will, and makes them the same. Whether they be the same or no, I will not now dispute; but only would observe, that if it be so, and the Arminian notion of liberty consists in a self-determining power in the Understanding, free of all necessity; being independent, undetermined by any thing prior to its own acts and determinations; and the more the Understanding is thus independent, and sovereign over its own determinations, the more free: then the freedom of the soul, as a moral agent, must consist in the independence of the Understanding on any evidence or appearance of things, or any thing whatsoever that stands forth to the view of the mind, prior to the Understanding's determination. And what a liberty is this; consisting in an ability, freedom, and easiness of judging, either according to evidence, or against it; having a sovereign command over itself at all times, to judge, either agreeably or disagreeably to what is plainly exhibited to its own view. Certainly, it is no liberty that renders persons the proper subjects of persuasive reasoning, arguments, expostulations, and such like moral means and inducements. The use of which with mankind is a main argument of the Arminians, to defend their notion of liberty without all necessity. For according to this, the more free men are, the less they are under the government of such means, less subject to the power of evidence and reason, and more independent on their influence, in their determinations.

And whether the Understanding and Will are the same or no, as Dr. Clark seems to suppose, yet in order to maintain the Arminian notion of liberty without necessity, the

free Will is not determined by the Understanding, nor necessarily connected with the Understanding; and the further from such Connexion, the greater the freedom. And when the liberty is full and complete, the determinations of the will have no Connexion at all with the Dictates of the Understanding. And if so, in vain are all the applications to the Understanding, in order to induce to any free virtuous act; and so in vain are all instructions, counsels, invitations, exhortations, and all arguments and persuasives whatsoever: for these are but applications to the Understanding, and a clear and lively exhibition of the objects of choice to the mind's view. But if, after all, the will must be self-determined, and independent on the Understanding, to what purpose are things thus represented to the Understanding, in order to determine the choice?

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