

Freedom of the Will

[Jonathan Edwards](#)

Part IV

**WHEREIN THE CHIEF GROUNDS OF THE REASONINGS OF
ARMINIANS, IN SUPPORT AND DEFENSE OF THE
AFOREMENTIONED NOTIONS OF LIBERTY, MORAL AGENCY,
&C. AND AGAINST THE OPPOSITE DOCTRINE, ARE
CONSIDERED.**

Section 1

**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.**

One main foundation of the reasons, which are brought to establish the fore-mentioned notions of liberty, virtue, vice, &c. is a supposition, that the virtuousness of the dispositions, or acts of the will, consists not in the nature of these dispositions or acts, but wholly in the origin or cause of them: so that if the disposition of the mind, or acts of the will, be never so good, yet if the cause of the disposition or act be not our virtue, there is nothing virtuous or praiseworthy in it; and, on the contrary, if the will, in its inclination or acts, be never so bad, yet unless it arises from something that is our vice or fault, there is nothing vicious or blameworthy in it. Hence their grand objection and pretended demonstration, or self-evidence, against any virtue and commendableness, or vice and blameworthiness, of those habits or acts of the Will, which are not from some virtuous or vicious determination of the will itself.

Now, if this matter be well considered, it will appear to be altogether a mistake, yea, a gross absurdity; and that it is most certain, that if there be any such things as a virtuous or vicious disposition, or volition of mind, the virtuousness or viciousness of them consists not in the origin or cause of these things, but in the nature of them.

If the essence of virtuousness or commendableness, and of viciousness or fault, does not lie in the nature of the dispositions or acts of mind, which are said to be our virtue or our fault, but in their cause, then it is certain it lies no where at all. Thus, for instance, if the vice of a vicious act of will lies not in the nature of the act, but the cause; so that its being of a bad nature will not make it at all our fault, unless it arises from some faulty determination of ours, as its cause, or something in us that is our fault; then, for the same reason, neither can the viciousness of that cause lie in the nature of the thing

itself, but in its cause: that evil determination of ours is not our fault, merely because it is of a bad nature, unless it arises from some cause in us that is our fault. And when we are come to this higher cause, still the reason of the thing holds good; though this cause be of a bad nature, yet we are not at all to blame on that account, unless it arises from something faulty in us. Nor yet can blameworthiness lie in the nature of this cause but in the cause of that. And thus we must drive faultiness back from step to step, from a lower cause to a higher, in infinitum; and that is thoroughly to banish it from the world, and to allow it no possibility of existence any where in the universality of things. On these principles, vice, or moral evil cannot exist in any thing that is an effect; because fault does not consist in the nature of things, but in their cause; as well as because effects are necessary, being unavoidably connected with their cause: therefore the cause only is to blame. And so it follows, that faultiness can lie only in that cause, which is a cause only, and no effect of anything. Nor yet can it lie in this; for then it must lie in the nature of the thing itself; not in its being from any determination of ours, nor anything faulty in us, which is the cause, nor indeed from any cause at all; for, by the supposition, it is no effect, and has no cause. And thus he that will maintain it is not the nature of habits or acts of will that makes them virtuous or faulty, but the cause, must immediately run himself out of his own assertion; and, in maintaining it, will insensibly contradict and deny it.

This is certain, that if effects are vicious and faulty, not from their nature, or from any thing inherent in them, but because they are from a bad cause, it must be on account of the badness of the cause: a bad effect in the will must be bad, because the cause is bad, or of an evil nature, or has badness as a quality inherent in it: and a good effect in the will must be good, by reason of the goodness of the cause, or its being of a good kind and nature. And if this be what is meant, the very supposition of fault and praise lying not in the nature of the thing, but the cause, contradicts itself, and does at least resolve the essence of virtue and vice into the nature of things, and supposes it originally to consist in that.— And if a caviler has a mind to run from the absurdity, by saying, “No, the fault of the thing, which is the cause, lies not in this, that the cause itself is of an evil nature, but that the cause is evil in that sense, that it is from another bad cause,” — still the absurdity will follow him; for if so, then the cause before charged is at once acquitted, and all the blame must be laid to the higher cause, and must consist in that’s being evil, or of an evil nature. So now we are come again to lay the blame of the thing blameworthy, to the nature of the thing, and not to the cause. And if any is so foolish as to go higher still, and ascend from step to step, till he is come to that which is the first cause concerned in the whole affair, and will say, all the blame lies in that; then, at last, he must be forced to own, that the faultiness of the thing which he supposes alone blameworthy, lies wholly in the nature of the thing, and not in the original or cause of it; for the supposition is, that it has no original, it is determined by no act of ours, is caused by nothing faulty in us, being absolutely without any cause. And so the race is at an end, but the evader is taken in his flight!

It is agreeable to the natural notions of mankind, that moral evil, with its desert of dislike and abhorrence, and all its other ill-deservings, consists in a certain deformity in the nature of certain dispositions of the heart and acts of the will; and not in the deformity of

something else, diverse from the very thing itself; which deserves abhorrence, supposed to be the cause of it;— which would be absurd, because that would be to suppose a thing that is innocent and not evil, is truly evil and faulty, because another thing is evil. It implies a contradiction; for it would be to suppose, the very thing which is morally evil and blameworthy, is innocent and not blameworthy; but that something else, which is its cause, is only to blame. To say, that vice does not consist in the thing which is vicious, but in its cause, is the same as to say, that vice does not consist in vice, but in that which produces it.

It is true a cause may be to blame for being the cause of vice: it may be wickedness in the cause that it produces wickedness. But it would imply a contradiction, to suppose that these two are the same individual wickedness. The wicked act of the cause in producing wickedness, is one wickedness; and the wickedness produced, if there be any produced, is another. And therefore the wickedness of the latter does not lie in the former, but is distinct from it; and the wickedness of both lies in the evil nature of the things which are wicked.

The thing which makes sin hateful, is that by which it deserves punishment; which is but the expression of hatred. And that which renders virtue lovely, is the same with that on the account of which it is fit to receive praise and reward; which are but the expressions of esteem and love. But that which makes vice hateful, is its hateful nature; and that which renders virtue lovely, is its amiable nature. It is a certain beauty or deformity that are inherent in that good or evil will, which is the soul of virtue and vice (and not in the occasion of it), which is their worthiness of esteem or disesteem, praise, or dispraise, according to the common sense of mankind. If the cause or occasion of the rise of a hateful disposition or act of will, be also hateful, suppose another antecedent evil will; that is entirely another sin, and, deserves punishment by itself, under a distinct consideration. There is worthiness of dispraise in the nature of an evil volition, and not wholly in some foregoing act, which is its cause; otherwise the evil volition, which is the effect, is no moral evil, any more than sickness, or some other natural calamity, which arises from a cause morally evil.

Thus, for instance, ingratitude is hateful and worthy of dispraise, according to common sense; not because something as bad, or worse than ingratitude, was the cause that produced it; but because it is hateful in itself, inherent deformity. So, the love of virtue is amiable and worthy of praise, not merely because something else went before this love of virtue in our minds, which caused it to take place there; — for instance, our own choice; we choose to love virtue, and, by some method or other, wrought ourselves into the love of it; — but because of the amiableness and condescendency of such a disposition and inclination of heart. If that was the case, that we did choose to love virtue, and so produced that love in ourselves, this choice itself could be no otherwise amiable or praiseworthy, than as love to virtue, or some other amiable inclination, was exercised and implied in it. If that choice was amiable at all, it must be so on account of some amiable quality in the nature of the choice. If we chose to love virtue, not in love to virtue, or any thing that was good and exercised no sort of good disposition to the

choice, the choice itself was not virtuous nor worthy of any praise, according to common sense, because the choice was not of a good nature.

It may not be improper here to take notice of something said by an author, that has lately made a mighty noise in America. "A necessary holiness (says he) is no holiness. Adam could not be originally created in righteousness and true holiness, because he must choose to be righteous, before he could be righteous. And therefore he must exist, he must be created; yea, he must exercise thought and reflection, before he was righteous." There is much more to the same effect in that place, and also in pp. 437, 438, 439, 440. If these things are so, it will certainly follow, that the first choosing to be righteous is no righteous choice; there is no righteousness or holiness in it, because no choosing to be righteous goes before it. For he plainly speaks of choosing to be righteous, as what must go before righteousness; and that which follows the choice, being the effect of the choice, cannot be righteousness or holiness; for an effect is a thing necessary, and cannot prevent the influence or efficacy of its cause; and therefore is unavoidably dependent upon the cause; and he says a necessary holiness is no holiness. So that neither can a choice of righteousness be righteousness or holiness, nor can any thing that is consequent on that choice, and the effect of it, be righteousness or holiness; nor can any thing that is without choice, be righteousness or holiness. So that by this scheme, all righteousness and holiness is at once shut out of the world, and no door left open by which it can ever possibly enter into the world.

I suppose the way that men came to entertain this absurd inconsistent notion, with respect to internal inclinations and volitions themselves (or notions that imply it,) viz. that the essence of their moral good or evil lies not in their nature, but their cause, was, that it is indeed a very plain dictate of common sense, that it is so with respect to all outward actions and sensible motions of the body; that the moral good or evil of them does not lie at all in the motions themselves, which, taken by themselves, are nothing of a moral nature; and the essence of all the moral good or evil that concerns them, lies in those internal dispositions and volitions which are the cause of them. Now, being always used to determine this, without hesitation or dispute, concerning external actions, which are the things that, in the common use of language, are signified by such phrases as men's actions, or their doings; hence, when they came to speak of volitions, and internal exercises of their inclinations, under the same denomination of their actions, or what they do, they unwarily determined the case must also be the same with these as with external actions; not considering the vast difference in the nature of the case.

If any shall still object and say, why is it not necessary that the cause should be considered, in order to determine whether any thing be worthy of blame or praise is it agreeable to reason and common sense, that a man is to be praised or blamed for that which he is not the cause or author of, and has no hand in?

I answer: Such phrases as being the cause, being the author, having a hand, and the like, are ambiguous. They are most vulgarly understood for being the designing voluntary cause, or cause by antecedent choice; and it is most certain, that men are not,

in this sense, the causes or authors of the first act of their wills, in any case, as certain as any thing is or ever can be; for nothing can be more certain than that a thing is not before it is, nor a thing of the same kind before the first thing of that kind, and so no choice before the first choice.— As the phrase, being the author, may be understood, not of being the producer by an antecedent act of will, but as a person maybe said to be the author of the act of will itself, by his being the immediate agent, or the being that is acting, or in exercise in that act; if the phrase of being the author is used to signify this, then doubtless common sense requires men's being the authors of their own acts of will, in order to their being esteemed worthy of praise or dispraise, on account of them. And common sense teaches, that they must be the authors of external actions, in the former sense, namely, their being the causes of them by an act of will or choice, in order to their being justly blamed or praised: but it teaches no such thing with respect to the acts of the will themselves. But this may appear more manifest by the things which will be observed in the following section.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*. If you would like to discuss this article in our online community, please visit our [RPM Forum](#).

Subscribe to RPM

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [RPM](#), please select this [link](#).