

The Benefit of Having a Worthy Opponent

How the Theology of Seventeenth-Century Puritans Can Be Complemented by the Nineteenth-Century German Thought Known as the Mercersburg Theology

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CHAPTER SIX (cont.)

Jonathan Edwards

Jonathan Edwards was a Congregationalist New England pastor who has been named the founder of American evangelicalism. His writings reveal a brilliant mind, a love for Christ and a passion for truth. In the preface to *Freedom of the Will* he wrote that “religion is the great business for which we are created” and that finding happiness depends upon our engagement in it.¹

In order to find that happiness in the practice of true religion, one must know both self and God properly. An analysis of the human person includes chiefly one’s understanding and will, with the will being most significant since out of it spring virtue and religion. Edwards defines will as “that by which the mind chooses any thing.”²

What determines how the will conducts itself? According to Edwards, “it is that motive, which, as it stands in the view of the mind, is the strongest, that determines the Will.”³ The mind can be influenced so that it desires certain effects and commits itself accordingly. Thus the Spirit of God could be one of such influences which leads the mind to action.⁴ Something can only be classified a motive if it can be perceived by the mind. What is outside the mind’s perception is no motive, for a motive presents a sense of advantage to the mind.

Considering the activity of the will carefully one will discern that there are three factors involved in exciting the will toward commitment – the nature and circumstance of the thing being considered or viewed, the nature and circumstances of the mind which is viewing it, and the degree or manor of that

¹ Jonathan Edwards, “A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of the Freedom of Will,” *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* Vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, reprinted 2011), 4.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6 footnote.

view. "The Will always is, as the greatest apparent good is."⁵ By good is meant that which is the opposite of what is evil, disagreeable and indifferent.

It is natural to seek beauty over the repulsive and pleasure over trouble, as well as to weigh whether the enjoyment of the desired pleasure is near or far off. Those that promise more immediate pleasure often hold greater influence than those which seem to be absent at any given time. Fruit tasted is a more powerful draw than fruit only imagined.⁶

What Edwards explains about the state of one's mind corroborates the brief introductory remarks above, that the quest for truth is complicated by many factors. The Will will be affected by one's natural temperament, the customs which one has learned and the amount and type of education one has been afforded. "In some sense, the Will always follows the last dictate of the understanding."⁷

This raises questions in the reader's mind as to whether one will always choose to follow understanding. What about addictions or a poisoned spirit or demonic possession where one seems to choose contrary to understanding? At this point Edwards admits that the Will overrules reason at times because of other influences acting on it.⁸

Will, Edwards asserts, is determined by the strongest motive. In order to gain insight into the working of the Will, some terms need to be defined. *Necessary* refers to what is impossible that it should not be but is to be regarded as certain. *Impossible* and *unable* are the label for what is insufficient to bring something to pass. *Irresistible* means unable to mitigate force of resistance to bring to pass a certain affect.⁹

Examples given of what is necessary include God's infinity and attributes, the fact that two plus two equals four, and being itself, for to deny being would imply that there is nothing, which is an absurdity.¹⁰ Whatever is necessary in itself has always existed. The only way a future event can be declared necessary is if it is connected with what is necessary in itself.

To speak of moral necessity can indicate moral obligation. Necessity then involves duty. It can also refer to necessity of consequence arising from moral causes. In other words, depending on the strength of inclination or motive, there

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰ Ibid., 9.

is a certainty to the resulting volitions and actions. This latter sense best represents Edwards' use of the term.¹¹

Natural necessity is that which is due to natural causes – e.g., pain when a wound is inflicted, the fact that black cannot be white and vice versa. Moral necessity of cause and effect can be absolute like that cause and effect which falls under the heading of natural necessity. Moral necessity is more concerned with choice than is natural necessity, but in many cases choice is a product of natural necessity.¹²

Moral inability refers to a lack of inclination or motives which excite the will or to encountering strong resistance from an opposing inclination or overpowering motives. Our author grants us some concrete examples of what he means by moral inability: a chaste and honorable woman unable to prostitute herself with a slave; a loving and obedient child unable to kill her parents; an alcoholic in the absence of restraints may be unable to resist temptation; a malicious man may be incapable of desiring good for an enemy.¹³ Strong habit may be a factor in placing a person into bondage. It may be that he is otherwise able to obey a law, but his will is not inclined to do so.

Liberty is defined as “the power, opportunity, or advantage, that any one has, to do as he pleases.”¹⁴ Restraint is not having power to act according to one's will. Constraint opposes liberty and causes the subject to act contrary to will by necessity. Arminians and Pelagians present a version of liberty which is a self-determining power of the will that exercises sovereignty over itself and is not dependent on any exterior cause.¹⁵ It is against this thesis that Edwards will contend.

A moral agent is capable of actions which have a moral quality. That is, those actions will be classified as either good or evil. Those actions emanate from a moral faculty which enables a person to recognize good and evil. Humans do not merely act on instinct as animals do. God is also a moral agent, but He is different from humans in that His will is not contingent on external forces. He is the source of all moral ability and agency.¹⁶

Humans bear the image of God and so are moral agents, but only in God can that quality be perfected. As a moral agent man has the ability to discern between good and evil, a capacity of choice guided by understanding and a power of acting according to choice or pleasure. Being fashioned in the natural

¹¹ Ibid., 10.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 11.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 12.

¹⁶ Ibid.

image of God is distinct from bearing a spiritual or moral image which refers to the original moral excellency Adam possessed at creation.¹⁷

As Part II of this work opens, more is explained regarding the Arminian teaching on the will. Arminian theology presents the will as having self-determining power. Edwards says that by will they specifically mean, “The soul in the exercise of a power of willing.” This, he explains, makes the act of the will dependent on a previous act of the will which itself is dependent on a previous act of the will, and so on. Eventually, this endless chain of causation becomes a contradiction. The first act in the sequence must be free for all subsequent acts to be free.¹⁸ If one could trace the chain of volition back to the first cause, and if one would find that it was not an act of the will, what could be concluded but that there is no such thing as freedom as Arminians claim?¹⁹

An Arminian may counter that the will is free to make spontaneous choices not connected to prior choice. To this Edwards poses the question as to what influences, determines or directs the will to choose as it does. “To say it is caused, influenced, and determined by something, and yet not influenced by anything antecedent, either in order of time or nature is a contradiction.” “If the particular act or exertion of will, which comes into existence, be anything properly determined at all, then it has some cause of existing, and existing in such a particular determinate manner, and not another.”²⁰ In other words, there must be a cause which decides the matter which is distinct from its effect and prior to it. To maintain “that the Will or mind orders, influences, and determines itself to exert an act by the very exertion itself, is to make the exertion both cause and effect,”²¹ or, the exerting/acting is the cause of the exerting/acting. How could an exertion be prior to itself in order to cause itself?

If an Arminian in an attempt to defend free will might counter that “the soul’s exertion of such a particular act of will, is a thing that comes to pass of itself, without any cause,” would it seem reasonable that the soul acts without reason and could have just as easily chosen the opposite of what it did? Such a line of thinking undermines meaning if the actions of the will arise from nothing.

Edwards uses the word *cause* to describe “any antecedent, either natural or moral, positive or negative, on which an Event, either a thing, or the manner and circumstance of a thing, so depends, that it is the ground and reason, either in whole, or in part, why it is rather than not.”²² Could volition come to pass without a cause? Edwards holds that nothing comes to pass without a cause. What is

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 13.

¹⁹ Ibid., 14.

²⁰ Ibid., 15.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

self-existent is eternal. All else that begins to be is not self-existent and must have a foundation of its existence outside of itself.

The same logic can be applied to the question of origins in the universe. Nothing in all of creation can exist apart from the First Cause. Living in a world where effects can come about without causes destroys the ability to gain knowledge. To assert free will with no driving Cause means millions of events come to be without any reason every moment worldwide.²³ It is no more plausible that the universe or an individual could exist without a cause than it is to believe that an act of the will came into existence without a cause. To say that the will is self-determining and is the cause of its effects is to claim that “the first exercise of activity is before the first exercise of activity, and is the Cause of it.”²⁴ But what would make the will change course and choose differently than it has in the past? If something influenced it, then one cannot conclude that the will is arbitrary in its decision-making and strictly self-determining. The will is not then truly independent.

What, then, of decisions made when the will seems to be indifferent? Edwards answers, “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.”²⁵ If Arminians could preserve indifference as perfect and absolute, then the individual could be a totally free agent. In order to have liberty the Arminian position requires that all humans exist in a state of indifference that is completely free of bias.²⁶ This means the Will must be void of all “antecedent preponderation,” because if it is inclined one way and yet is indifferent, that would mean that it both prefers and does not prefer an option simultaneously. Every free act would have to be exerted from a state of freedom. To this Edwards counters that “Choice and preference can no more be in a state of Indifference, than motion can be in a state of rest.”²⁷ How could the will in a perfect state of indifference move itself to choice or preference? The soul cannot be in a state of choice and equilibrium at the same instant. That would mean the soul chooses without choice and prefers without preference. On the matter Edwards concludes that “Liberty of mind does not consist in Indifference.”²⁸

Again our author reiterates, “Every effect has a necessary connexion with its cause, or with that which is the true ground and reason of its existence.”²⁹ Men and women choose based on what they discern to be the most agreeable option. The mind contains images and ideas which exert power to govern the volitional

²³ Ibid., 16.

²⁴ Ibid., 17.

²⁵ Ibid., 20.

²⁶ Ibid., 21.

²⁷ Ibid., 22.

²⁸ Ibid., 23.

²⁹ Ibid., 24.

process. It constantly weighs the degree of good to be obtained or the evil to be avoided. The will chooses what is approved in one's understanding and deemed good by the soul.³⁰

God requires all people to choose the good and reject the evil, but it is verifiable by experience that there is in humans an innate tendency to avoid the good, even the call of the Gospel. Therefore, the conclusion is that humans are naturally prone to evil, and the Holy Spirit must change an individual's corrupt disposition so that the good can be recognized and desired as well as evil recognized and shunned. The will chooses and refuses based on an antecedent cause which is not the will itself.³¹

Edwards deals with another possible argument from Arminians who would claim that a man is not bound in his decision-making by evidence or reason.³² In other words, they would promote the idea of liberty without necessity or that the will can act free of any constraint placed upon it from the understanding.

However, Edwards points out that such logic would make appeals to understanding to stimulate a person to virtuous action quite futile. In fact, instruction, counsel and arguments would all be rendered useless.

If the will is not driven by motives, it then is left with no goal or purpose for its decisions. Motives bias the will and create inclination within it. At this point Mr. Edwards refutes a Mr. Chubb who held that any effect motives were allowed on the will only came to be because of a choice of the will to be influenced. In other words, the will has power to choose whether it will be influenced by motives or not. But logically, how can a choice be made not to be influenced before the motive actually influences? Edwards avers that this is tantamount to saying that the soul decided before it existed by what cause it would come into existence.³³ If the reader is still following Edwards at this point, he may ask whether there would not be motives which govern whether or not to allow motives to influence the will. And are those motives contingent on previous influences?

Mr. Edwards further questions Mr. Chubb's reasoning by noting that Mr. Chubb maintains that motive is the ground of volition while at the same time holds that because it is free to do so the will sometimes selects the weaker influence instead of the stronger. It seems Mr. Chubb then has a contradiction in his thinking since he would be asserting that the will acts apart from motive while he denies it can.³⁴ Edwards pictures Mr. Chubb's understanding of free will by having the reader imagine a scale in which the side with the lighter weight presses downward rather than the side with the heavier weight. Mr. Chubb is

³⁰ Ibid., 25.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 27.

³⁴ Ibid., 28.

claiming that the will is not subject to the normal laws of influence just as the scale would not be subject to the normal law of gravity.³⁵

Mr. Chubb denied that necessity and free agency could coincide without liberty and necessity becoming identical. His opinion was that if a man is not free to choose but is compelled by necessity of nature, that he cannot be held liable for reward or punishment. He said, "When the self-moving power is exerted, it becomes the necessary cause of its effects." However, this makes the exertion of the will both free and a matter of necessity. Edwards interprets Mr. Chubb's scheme as that of free acts which are the products of free acts which in turn require an infinite number of free acts in succession without any beginning.³⁶

Mr. Chubb denies that motives are causes of acts of the will because the moving principle in a person must be a self-moving principle. But at the same time he acknowledges that motives can excite the will and induce volition. In fact, he says that volition cannot take place without motives. More specifically, he says that motives are the ground or reason of action because they exert prevailing influence which produces action. That sounds like the logical fallacy known as distinction without a difference. As expected, Edwards responds that if motives dispose the mind to action, then they cause it to will.³⁷

Edwards then develops his argument by stating that God has foreknowledge of the voluntary acts of moral actors. That means that the volition of those agents is not to be considered contingent as if without "necessity of connexion and consequence."³⁸ God's foreknowledge is evident by His foretelling. He foretold events contingent on moral conduct of certain persons. Many examples are included in the text of both individuals and nations. One such example was the return of the exiles from Babylon which was contingent on their repentance.³⁹

Christ's kingdom consists in establishing the dominion of virtue in human hearts and converting them to willing obedience and righteous choices of the will. God knew the choices men would make or else the outcome of His promises (such as those to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) would be uncertain. God converts people to trust, love and serve Him. He acts to subdue the influence of sin on the will. Consider the complexity of the fulfilment of Daniel's prophecies about the four great kingdoms. Their leaders came to power because of millions of decisions their parents and contemporaries made as well as the decisions of countless previous generations.⁴⁰

³⁵ Ibid., 29.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 30.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 31-32.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 32-33.

God foreknew the volition of the moral agent named Adam which necessitated the coming of the Son of God as Redeemer. Hence the Scriptures reveal that He planned salvation before the beginning of the world and time (Ephesians 1:4; 1 Peter 1:20; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 1:2; Romans 8:29; 1 Peter 1:2). Without foreknowledge of the actions of moral agents, God would have to constantly repent and change course to counter and compensate and respond to man's choices as they are discovered. Yet the Bible reveals God to be immutable (Malachi 3:6; Job 23:13-14).⁴¹

Verses such as Proverbs 19:21; Psalm 33:10-11; Isaiah 14:27; Job 42:2 and Ecclesiastes 3:14 are cited to support that God's will is unalterable. If it were not, then the effectiveness of the incarnation, atonement and resurrection could be questioned, for too much uncertainty would surround the yet-to-be-determined actions of moral agents. However, the Scriptures reveal that God is surely obtaining His goals for creation. God cannot fail.⁴²

Arminians try to posit that God's foreknowledge does not warrant the necessity of any foreknown event. Edwards offers the following line of reasoning in response. The events of the past are necessary and cannot be altered. Any foreknowledge God has of the volitions of free moral agents is now a past event and cannot be altered and thus is necessary. All that is connected with necessary things itself becomes necessary. So no future event can be foreknown if it is completely contingent on free moral agents as Arminians insist must be in all cases. To illustrate the Arminian argument Edwards imagines a world springing into existence without cause and not foreseen to God because there was no evidence of its coming. In like manner Edwards assumes Arminians expect God is surprised at what springs up from free will in moral agents. What God knows cannot at the same time be infallible truth and contingent uncertainty.⁴³

As the modern reader digests Edwards' argument, he may be struck with the similarity between the Arminian assumption that volitional worlds can spring up as from nothing just as evolutionary theory claims the same about the natural universe. Both seem to be organically connected on a logical level with the shared goal of preserving human freedom when a sovereign God is in the picture.

Next the reader encounters Edwards engaging the arguments of a Dr. Whitby who tries to say that God's prescience is not the cause of future events but that future events instead cause God's prescience. He claimed that foreknowledge would have no more bearing on making an event necessary than after-knowledge would. Edwards explains that "Infallible Foreknowledge may prove

⁴¹ Ibid., 34-35.

⁴² Ibid., 35.

⁴³ Ibid., 35-36.

the Necessity of the event foreknown, and yet not be the thing which causes the Necessity.”⁴⁴

Also included in this section is an editorial footnote which explains that Dr. Whitby and Arminians are troubled by the necessity created by God’s decrees, for they cannot reconcile how if God is responsible for the necessity of all that is how He could not be implicated in the charge of bringing evil into existence. Edwards held that some events were necessary not because they were decreed but were foreordained. Others are necessary because of the nature of things. For example, the fact that a creature is not infinite is not the product of a divine decree.⁴⁵

Edwards held that foreknowledge proves necessity, even if it not the cause. An existence infallibly foreknown cannot fail. “There must be a certainty in things themselves, before they are certainly known.”⁴⁶

Again an editorial footnote facilitates a fuller understanding of the developing argument. There one reads that chance is nothing and has no properties and thus no causal influence. Also, a contingent being’s existence implies the existence of an absolute Being or First Cause. Absolute necessity applies only to God; all other beings bear an hypothetical necessity. An event is necessary only because of its relation to the First Cause. “Every contingent being and event must necessarily depend on God, as an effect depends upon its cause.” Again, all necessity arises from the nature of things or by decree.⁴⁷

What arises from nature has either an efficient or deficient cause. A defect can be either natural or moral. “Natural defect arises from the nature of things in the way of contrast to God’s natural perfections.” God is perfect and indefectible and not subject to passive power. Humans are subject to passive power and are imperfect and defectible. All antecedents originate either in passive power or divine decrees. From the former evil may come, and from the latter good.⁴⁸

Moral defect is contrasted to the moral perfection of God (i.e., His holiness). It is a necessary consequence and not from an antecedent divine decree but from the hypothetical nature of things or passive power if that passive power is not aided by “decretive interposition” and united to liberty of choice in an accountable being.⁴⁹

If God decrees an end, it is implied that the means are included in the decree. Therefore, an event may be necessary because of its link in a series of

⁴⁴ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 37-38.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 39.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

antecedents involved in a divine decree, or by the nature of things wherein natural antecedents are not altered by a causal decree. Defect was not decreed by God because God is good, and nothing but good can proceed from Him.⁵⁰

If there were no passive power, there would be no divine decrees, for if nature produced only good, a decree expressing or accomplishing good would be superfluous. "Whatever is in itself good, is an object of divine decree in its antecedent." So all virtuous or holy choices are made only as a result of an antecedent decree issued by a nature that is good. God foresees all good because of decretive necessity and the antecedents He has put in place. He foresees all evil by hypothetical necessity which is due to the nature of things unhindered by decrees or "left to their own causal influence." Good volitional acts are those that are the product of "decretive appointment and energy" and so are foreknown on those grounds. A bad volitional act is partly decretive and partly hypothetical necessity.⁵¹

Edwards explains that if the act of one's will has a cause it is not contingent but necessary. Arminians believe that necessity is inconsistent with liberty, but their scheme makes every free act of the will depend on a previous one and that makes such acts necessary. This creates a dilemma in that Arminians claim acts of the will cannot be both free and necessary but yet logically those free acts are necessary.

Arminian thinking would counter by saying that the will acts without a prior cause. However, this reduces the will to choosing arbitrarily. If the will's actions are not arbitrary, then they must be according to some predetermined standard which itself is the product of the prior action of the will to create or adopt such a standard. Edwards' logic resonates with the reader, for who can picture the will acting without influence from causes or an established order? Is it possible for the soul to be connected to nothing and dependent on nothing? Yet Arminians hold that liberty is "the will's power of determining itself in its own acts, and being wholly active in it, without passiveness, and without being subject to Necessity."⁵² This amounts to acting at random, without restraint of government, reason, etc. It attempts to ascribe to the human will complete sovereignty, even freedom to act apart from understanding.⁵³

Is that Arminian definition of liberty necessary to establish moral agency and be judged in terms of virtue and vice? To answer this, Edwards evaluates God based on what is revealed in Scripture. His moral excellency is necessary and it is also virtuous and praiseworthy. In His case, necessity does not destroy virtue. In contrast, Dr. Whitby says that if all human actions are necessary, then virtue and vice become meaningless labels since humans would not be free and

⁵⁰ Ibid., 39-40.

⁵¹ Ibid., 40. Here the lengthy footnote ends.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 41.

therefore should not be or could not be held responsible for their actions. Yet Arminians admit God is of necessity holy, and His will necessarily is determined then to conform to the holiness of His nature. Why does not their view of necessity apply to God as well? How can they still recognize Him as virtuous? Since God cannot avoid being holy, should He not be praised or thanked? The Scriptures present God as exhibiting and being in Himself the highest of all virtues and worthy of endless praise.⁵⁴

The acts of Jesus' human will, says Edwards, were necessarily holy, yet also praiseworthy and virtuous and liable for reward. It was impossible for Jesus to be other than He was, yet His trial and testing were real. God had promised to preserve and uphold Him (Isaiah 43:1-4). He would not fail to accomplish the purpose for which He had entered the world.⁵⁵ God's promises made the things promised necessary and their failure impossible (Psalm 110:4; 2:6-7; 45:3-4; Isaiah 3:13-15; 53:9-12; 9:6-7; Jeremiah 23:5-6). Christ spoke in the Gospels about the necessity of the Old Testament being fulfilled (Luke 24:44; Matthew 26:53-54; Mark 14:49; Acts 1:16-17). The Old Testament promises about salvation guaranteed Christ's success (cf. Hebrews 6:17-18). Then there are promises made by the Father to the Son. Christ was a moral agent, subject to commands and promises (John 10:18; 15:10; 12:49-50; 14:31; Hebrews 12:1-2). Yet Dr. Whitby asserts that necessity does not fit with injunctions and prohibitions. If Dr. Whitby's logic is applied to Jesus, then He must've functioned in a mechanical way, and His actions would not have been praiseworthy at all. Yet all of heaven and His Father praise Him.⁵⁶

Considering whether necessity also destroys culpability as Dr. Whitby claims, Edwards points out that God gave some persons up to sin (Psalm 81:12; Acts 7:42; Romans 1:24, 26, 28). That sounds like necessity and highlights human inability. Consider Judas who would betray Christ. After Christ declared what Judas would do, his actions became a matter of necessity. Yet those persons were still considered blameworthy and were not absolved from culpability due to Arminian logic that this simply made them mechanical actors and not moral agents. Judas, for example, was condemned.

Dr. Whitby claims that in order for a sin to be culpable, it must be in the subject's power to perform or forbear it, and he cites as an authority Origen who said, "no man is blameworthy for not doing what he could not do." Whitby attempts to solve this issue by determining that God does not give up persons to sin in the sense that their wills would be necessarily determined to do evil. Instead, he describes this giving a person over to sin to be a giving that person a strong bent or powerful inclination toward evil that makes it quite difficult to do good. To this Edwards counters that if an impossibility of avoiding sin excuses a man from

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ See Isaiah 49:7-9; 50:5-6.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 42-45.

responsibility for his actions, that being in a state where it is extremely difficult to avoid it should also exonerate the actor.⁵⁷

“If we have it not in our power to be innocent, then we have it not in our power to be blameless; and if so, we are under a Necessity of being blameworthy,” said Edwards. Also, “If we have it not in our power to perform perfect obedience to all the commands of God, then we are under a Necessity of breaking some commands, in some degree; having no power to perform so much as is commanded.”⁵⁸

The Arminian defense is that God would be unjust by requiring something beyond the ability of humans to perform. Yet Edwards remains firm that God’s command that humans be obedient is not inconsistent with their inability to obey. Again looking to an editorial footnote, the reader finds additional helpful reasoning. Moral ability is not necessary to establish moral obligation as Arminians claim. All that is required is that an end is proposed with means available to reach that end, and that the subject is not physically restrained from pursuing those means.⁵⁹

Returning to Edwards’ text, if Arminians claim that present acts of the will are not consequent to antecedent acts of the will but spring up by pure accident without any determining cause, then how can the idea of law or precept even begin to apply? Laws cannot direct perfect accident because laws are intended to turn the will one way or another. Law cannot then be effective if liberty equals indifference. Our author writes, “the very opposition or defect of the Will itself, in its original and determining act in the case, to a thing proposed or commanded, or its failing of compliance, implies a moral inability to that thing.”⁶⁰ Law is in effect, but there is a defect in the human will that prevents perfect adherence to it. The will is determined by the strongest motive. Again the editor adds a footnote to further develop this thought. It states that motive as used here does not refer only to external stimulus but also to the internal state of the mind affecting its ability to respond. For example, a wicked man would not respond well to a presentation of God as the chief good because his mind is in a state that cannot or will not recognize that good. So the state of the mind is crucial in choosing between right and wrong as it affects how the object is perceived.

The will is unable to change its own inclination. Says Edwards, “Present choice cannot at present choose to be otherwise.”⁶¹ Choice by accident is ruled out because the will cannot escape its own original determining choice and inclination. A first determining act cannot be reversed. It cannot be retroactively regulated by the Will. “The Will, in every instance, acts by moral necessity, and is

⁵⁷ Ibid., 46.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 47.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 48.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 49.

⁶¹ Ibid.

morally unable to act otherwise.” Moral inability is reinforced by fixed habits. The strength of commands to those who possess a moral inability to obey them is not lost due to that inability. If inability or defect of inclination excuses a person who is disobedient, then “wickedness always carries that in it which excuses it.”⁶² The more wickedness resident in a man’s heart, the stronger his inclination toward evil, and the greater his moral inability. But according to Arminian thinking, such a person has a greater excuse and should be released from liability. Edwards believed that those who lacked natural ability (e.g., in the case of someone who is mentally impaired) to comply with the law’s demands (not moral ability) would be excused.

Edwards briefly treats the Arminian desire to count sincerity as having moral weight and in some sense the ability to excuse a sinner. His explanation includes the fact that demons asked Jesus not to torment them, but the mere fact that a being sincerely asks Jesus for something does not constitute him or her virtuous. Only good can combat evil. Sincerity cannot. A man in his natural state doing the best he can has no more merit before God than if he were to do nothing. A man doing all he can in his natural state possesses no more moral goodness than a windmill doing all it can because neither action proceeds from virtue.⁶³

The liberty of indifference is neither necessary to virtue nor even consistent with it. A virtuous heart is one that favors virtue, and not one that is characterized by indifference. Indifference could actually be counted vicious instead of virtuous. For example, if it be proposed that God should be blasphemed or that murder should be committed and the response was one of indifference, there is certainly no virtue present. If indifference or self-determining power is a prerequisite for moral agency, then the will must be swayed by itself alone as if it is supremely sovereign.⁶⁴

Arminians are forced to hold a position which states that “no man is virtuous or vicious, either in being well or ill disposed, nor in acting from a good or bad disposition.” If bias or disposition arises a moment before the will commits itself to act, then the choice must be viewed as the product of necessity. But if actions do not spring from a certain interior disposition, then a choice has not actually been made, but a contingency has befallen the actor.⁶⁵

Beginning Part IV of this work, Edwards teaches that the essence of virtue or vice of dispositions of the heart or acts of the will is not formulated according to what the cause is but according to the nature from which those dispositions or acts spring.⁶⁶ A lengthy footnote is again inserted in order to expand the argument of the primary text. In it the script unfolds that the first Cause of all

⁶² Ibid., 50.

⁶³ Ibid., 52-53.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 54.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 55.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 57.

creation was virtuous. God is the standard of moral excellence. Excellence lies in God's nature. Created natures are moral as they resemble God. At this point is reiterated that the essence of vice or virtue among creatures does not lie in its cause but rests on the nature that gives birth to either. The ground or cause of virtuous acts is a previous inclination or disposition toward good before any choice occurs. The original or predisposing cause in that instance is holy influence from the decretive will of God. Good or virtue cannot be attributed to a person until it becomes resident as a quality of his nature.⁶⁷ Reason testifies that a person who commits blameworthy acts is to be blamed and not merely some other cause within him which would then excuse him. Edwards concludes, "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 men who are the cause of their own actions and as such deserve praise or blame.⁶⁸

Due to God's creative decrees, man has an active nature and is compelled by nature to make choices. Yet a creature is subject to passive power which opens the door to the possibility of moral evil and derives from being dependent in contrast to God who is independent. God is necessary; creatures are contingent.⁶⁹ Wherever there is choice and hypothetical possibilities the actor is a moral agent and is morally obliged to choose well. He will be held accountable for his choices. If God influences the mind to reflect His moral nature, the result will be good, and passive power will be counteracted. Moral influence is not certain to produce an effect unless the state of the mind is proper to receive it. So a virtuous mind must precede a virtuous choice. "A holy disposition is generated by decretive holy influence."⁷⁰

A good volition can come only from a good heart, but a bad volition does not necessarily have to proceed from a morally bad heart. Passive power creates the opportunity for volition; it is a natural evil and not a moral evil.⁷¹ An allusion to Dr. Clark's *Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* indicates that it is not a fault but a perfection of our nature to desire, will and act rightly. It is not a loss of freedom to have godly inclinations. The further removed one is from such a good heart, the closer one is to slavery and misery.⁷²

God is sovereign and so has ability and supreme authority to do whatever pleases Him. His will is underived and independent of anything outside of Himself. The same holds true for His wisdom which determines His will. That means He is compelled by necessity and is not disadvantaged by that fact. It would not be to His glory to act at random. Here Edwards quotes an Arminian

⁶⁷ Ibid., 58.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 59-60.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 60, footnote.

⁷⁰ Ibid., footnote.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 70, footnote.

who surmises that if God performed His actions out of moral necessity that they are nothing but mechanical acts of fate and fail to meet the standard of virtue.⁷³

Edwards devotes a section to answering the critics of his teachings who would say that they make God the author of sin. Our teacher uses an example regarding the sun to lead the reader to better understand how God could order the events in the world yet not author sin. There is a difference between God permitting sin and Him authoring it. He does permit it when it is needful for His goals, but He does not approve of it. In this case the One who orders the affairs of the universe is not the One who acts to produce sin.

The sun causes heat and light. But when it falls below the horizon, darkness and frost are the result. The movement of the sun is the occasion of darkness and frost, but the sun is not the efficient and proper cause of either. Nor does it produce them indirectly. It is not a fountain of cold or darkness. Likewise sin happens in the absence of God's influence or energy. This actually proves He is a fountain of all holiness and that sin originates with man and not with God.⁷⁴

All the events in the world will be ordered by something – either divine wisdom or chance. Edwards asks,

Is it not better, that the good and evil which happen in God's world, should be ordered, regulated, bounded, and determined by the good pleasure of an infinitely wise Being, who perfectly comprehends within his understanding and constant view, the universality of things, in all their extent and duration, and sees all the influence of every event, with respect to every individual thing and circumstance, throughout the grand system, and the whole of the eternal series of consequences; than to leave these things to fall out by chance, and to be determined by those causes which have no understanding or aim?⁷⁵

A good example of such a God in action is the life of Joseph and how evil was used for good. God has both a disposing and a preceptive will. The former is secret and the latter is revealed. By what is revealed, for instance, in the Law, God is clearly seen to be holy. For example, He would execute justice on those who murdered Jesus.

Yet at the same time, the crucifixion was a glorious event and agreeable to His will, that is, His disposing will. The fact that God has a will of choice respecting what is good and a will of rejection which condemns evil is not a contradiction. "There is no inconsistency in supposing that God may hate a thing as it is in itself, and considered simply as evil, and yet that it may be His will it should come

⁷³ Ibid., 71.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 76-77.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 78.

to pass, considering all consequences.”⁷⁶ A reference to the work of Mr. Turnbull relates that the evil which happens in this world is not permitted by God “for its own sake or through any pleasure in evil, but because it is requisite to the greater good pursued.”⁷⁷

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⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 79, footnote.