Jonathan Edwards and Free Will

An Appreciation and Critique

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INTRODUCTION

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) is often thought to be one of the greatest philosophers America has yet produced. While in our day, Edwards' name may be more frequently associated with the strict Puritanism and fire and brimstone preaching of times long past, his contributions to philosophical discussion should not be forgotten. Whether one loves or hates this man (and when it comes to evaluating Edwards, it seems there is no neutrality), one must respect the brilliance of his penetrating intellect. Truly, he was and continues to be one of the giants in the American scholarly landscape.

No historical discussion of the free will issue is complete without reference to Edwards' magisterial *Freedom of the Will* (1754). In this work, Edwards defends classical Calvinistic compatibilism against the encroachments of Arminianism.[1] Edwards is clearly convinced of the magnitude of his subject:

> [The freedom of the will] is of such importance, as to *demand* attention, and the most thorough consideration. Of all kinds of knowledge that we can ever obtain, the knowledge of God, and the knowledge of ourselves are the most important. As religion is the great business, for which we are created, and on which our happiness depends; and as religion consists in an intercourse between ourselves and our Maker; and so had its foundation in God's nature and ours, and in the relation that God and we stand in to each other; therefore a true knowledge of both must be needful, in order to true religion. But the knowledge of ourselves consists chiefly in right apprehensions concerning those two chief faculties of our nature, the *understanding* and *will.* Both are very important: yet the science of the latter

[1]In the preface to *Freedom of the Will,* Edwards discusses the use of theological (or philosophical) labels. While recognizing the inherent dangers in this practice, Edwards also insists that such labels are needed for the sake of convenience. This paper will follow suit. By Calvinism, Edwards has in view the system of doctrine taught by the Reformer John Calvin (1509-1564), which emphasizes God's providence and humanity's need for God's grace in order to be saved from the predicament of human evil and divine wrath. By Arminianism, Edwards has in view the system of doctrine taught by Jacob Arminius (1560-1609), which emphasizes the autonomy of the human will in the salvation process.

> must be confessed to be of greatest moment; inasmuch as all virtue and religion have their seat more immediately in the will, consisting more especially in right acts and habits of this faculty. And the grand question about the freedom of the will, is the main point that belongs to the science of the will. Therefore I say, the importance of this subject greatly *demands* the attention of Christians, and especially of divines.[2]

Edwards' work is quite prolix and polemical in tone, making it a somewhat difficult text with which to interact. However, Edwards proceeds very methodically and so the basic structure of his work is easy enough to follow. In Part I, which will be most important for our purposes, he engages in what we would call today "ordinary language analysis," defining key terms and drawing key distinctions as they relate to the free will controversy. Part II asks if the Arminian concept of free will (a self-caused, uncaused, or indifferent will) is intelligible. Part III challenges the Arminian assumption that their notion of free will is essential to moral responsibility. Finally, the fourth part takes up a variety of objections to Edwards' Calvinistic doctrine.

THE WILL DEFINED

Edwards begins his inquiry with a definition: "The *Will* (without any metaphysical refining) is, *That by which the mind chooses any thing.*"[3] The will is simply the mind's (or soul's) faculty of choosing. Virtually everything else Edwards has to say about free will flows out of this definition.

However, several objections may immediately be raised against the definition Edwards has given us. First, what about the act of refusal? Is the will active if the mind refuses to choose from the options available to it? Edwards considers the act of refusal to be an act of the will. The will simply chooses the "absence of the thing refused."[4]

The second objection comes from John Locke, who wishes to distinguish the will from desire. Edwards admits a slight distinction between these terms ("desire" seems to

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[2] Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will* in Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols. (1834; Carlisle, PA.: Banner of Truth, 1992), 1:4.
[3] Ibid., 4 col. A-B.

refer only to things absent, while "will" seems to be a more general term, referring to things present and absent), but argues that "they are not so entirely distinct, that they can ever be properly said to run counter."[5] For Edwards, it is a virtual axiom that the will chooses according to desire. Or, to give the corollary, one never chooses contrary to desire. Desire corresponds to motive in that the determining factor in any choice is motive: "*It is that motive, which, as it stands in the view of the mind, is the strongest, that determines the Will."*[6] To be motivated by something is to desire it.

The third objection is a little more difficult. One might question the axiom of Edwards stated in the preceding paragraph. Don't we sometimes choose contrary to desire? What about cases of self-denial and coercion? Obviously, Edwards must allow for a great deal of complexity in our choice making. We often have conflicting desires and competing motivations. We also have varying levels of desire; in fact, many times our desires seem to change moment by moment. In addition, sometimes we are coerced and have to choose contrary to what we would ordinarily desire, all things being equal. But Edwards does not deny any of these realities. His definition simply means that, given the various motives and restrictions of our situation, we will choose according to the strongest desire at the time the choice is made.[7]

THE WILL DETERMINED

We have already gotten a taste of Edwardsean faculty psychology in analyzing his definition of the will. But when we take up the questions, "What determines our choices? Why does a person choose one thing rather than another?" we see the crucial distinction between the mind and the will becomes even more important.

For Edwards, the determination of the will is the *cause* of the will's choice. The choice itself is the *effect* of whatever determined the will. An uncaused will is absurd,

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[4] Ibid., 4 col. B.
[5] Ibid., 5 col. A.
[6] Ibid., 5 col. B. It is important to understand what Edwards means by motive. Edwards has in view the sum total of the situational factors our minds apprehend. As he says, "By *motive*, I mean the whole of that which moves, excites, or invites the mind to volition, whether that be one thing singly, or many things conjunctly" (Ibid., 6 col. A). Motives create desire and induce the mind to act through the will.
[7] For example, if we are dieting, whether or not we choose to order dessert will depend, in the last analysis, on which desire is strongest when the waiter happens to come back around – the desire to lose weight or the desire to enjoy the dessert. If we are being coerced by a mugger, we will (probably) give up our money rather than lose our lives because we desire to live more than we desire to keep our cash.

according to Edwards. But what is it that determines the will? What is the cause of the will's effect? We have already seen how Edwards will answer this because his reply is built into his definition of the will itself. According to Edwards, the will is simply an expression of the mind's desire. The mind directs the will according to its perception of motivation. The mind judges the strongest motive, which in turn leads the will to act accordingly. The strongest motive, of course, is that which appears to be most "good" to the mind. Edwards does not use "good" in a moral sense here, but in the sense of what is most pleasing or agreeable to the mind. The good is the desirable. In his own language, "Nothing can induce or invite the mind to will [except what] is properly called a motive…the will is always determined by the strongest motive…*the Will always follows the last dictate of the understanding*."[8] In short, the will is determined, or caused, by the greatest apparent good as judged by the mind.

Some of Edwards' fiercest attacks against Arminianism come in the context of discussing the will's determination. Edwards completely rejects the Arminian idea of a self-caused, or self-determined, will as unintelligible. Edwards attacks the Arminians on their own ground at this point, showing the logical contradictions involved in this notion. If the will freely determines all its acts independently, then each of its acts is preceded by another free act. But this train of free acts either leads to an infinite regress, or it must be started with a first act which is not self-caused.[9]

If the Arminians appeal to the will's indifference as the source of its freedom (which was a popular tactic in the eighteenth century), Edwards is also ready with an answer. The notion of indifference is actually destructive of freedom and leads to absurdity: "For how ridiculous would it be for anybody to insist, that the soul chooses one thing before another, when at the very same instant it is perfectly indifferent with respect to each!" "Choice and preference can no more be in a state of indifference than motion

[8] Ibid. 6 col. A, 7 col. B.

[9] Edwards' explanation is worth quoting at some length: "If the will determines the will, then choice orders and determines the choice: and acts of choice are subject to the decision, and follow the conduct of other acts of choice…Which brings us to a contradiction: for it supposes an act of the will preceding the first act in the whole train, directing and determining the rest; or a free act of the will, before the first free act of the will. Or else, we must come at last to an act of the will, determining the consequent acts, wherein the will is not self-determined, and so is not a free act…but if the first act in the train…be not free, none of them all can be free." Ibid., 13 col. A-B.

can be in a state of rest…"[10] If there is no motive, there is no cause, and with no cause there can be no effect, i.e., no choice. All there can be is an arbitrary "accident" of nature and it is hard to see how such an event differs from an involuntary action. At most, indifference would suspend choice, not create it. An indifferent will, ultimately, is an uncaused will, which is an absurdity.

An indifferent will not only seems to destroy freedom, but morality and responsibility as well. If an objective good is chosen indifferently, a morally good choice has not really been made: "if there be any acts which are done in a state of equilibrium, or spring immediately from perfect indifference and coldness of heart, they cannot arise from any good principle or disposition in the heart; and consequently, according to common sense, have no sincere goodness in them, having no virtue of heart in them."[11] Edwards rejects the Arminian view as counter-intuitive.

What are we to make of Edwards' understanding of how the will is determined? Certainly his critique of an uncaused, self-caused, or indifferent will left the Arminians little ground on which to stand. But perhaps the one vulnerable aspect of Edwards' analysis thus far is in his understanding of the human psychological makeup. It seems his psychology leaves many unanswered questions. How are we to understand the relation between the will and the mind? Is it true that the will has no sovereignty whatsoever? Is the will always and only subordinated to the mind? Is the will simply a means to the mind's end? Has Edwards left adequate room for human emotion? It is not entirely clear how Edwards might respond to these questions. However, it seems best to look again at his definitions. Edwards is working with a very broad definition of mind, but a quite narrow definition of will. For Edwards, the mind is virtually synonymous with the soul

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[10] Quoted in Conrad Cherry, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards: A Reappraisal* (1966; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 193-194. Jenson explains the contradiction Edwards sees inherent in the notion of an indifferent will: "When, asks Edwards, is the will supposed to be in this state of "indifference?" It cannot be at the moment of choice, for since choice is inclination, this would be to say that the mind inclines when it is not inclining. Thus the actual Arminian position is that choice, to be free, *supercedes* on a state of indifference. But here is disaster, for if indifference defines freedom, if I am unfree to the extent that motives and predilections incline me, choice thus comes to be seen as *foreclosing* freedom: the exercise of freedom becomes the enemy of freedom's possession. Edwards regards such as preposterous. And so on, no doubt it is, but it has nonetheless become the practiced conviction of American society, in which commitment is avoided because freedom must be preserved." Robert Jenson, *America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards* (1988; Oxford: Oxford University Press), 163.

[11] Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 54 col. A.

or self.[12] It cannot simply be equated with the intellect, though it does include the intellect. It is also important to note that Edwards groups the emotions, or, what he liked to call the affections, with the will.[13] The will may be distinguished from the mind, but certainly not separated from it. The will is not an autonomous agent of some sort.[14] Rather it is the choosing faculty of the mind itself. Thus, when the will acts, in actuality, the whole person is acting.[15] Edwards' formulation could be improved upon, no doubt, but it is important to notice that Edwards' psychology is more integrated than it might appear at first.

THE WILL AND LIBERTY IN RELATION TO NECESSITY AND CONTINGENCY

Edwards' language analysis continues when he turns to charged terms such as necessity, contingency, and liberty. For Edwards, much of our confusion over these terms stems from philosophers who depart from ordinary usage, but then unthinkingly slip back into it. A thorough overview of how Edwards would have us use these terms would be quite agonizing and cannot be done here due to space constraints. But a brief overview will help us see how Edwards is proceeding in his project.

In ordinary language, necessity and contingency are relative terms. An event is said to be necessary when it is impossible for it to not be, when it cannot be otherwise. Contingency in ordinary usage refers to events that are unpredictable relative to our knowledge because we cannot discern all antecedent causes. But philosophers frequently use these terms in more complex ways. Edwards does not necessarily believe this is wrong, but it becomes a problem if we do not maintain a high degree of rigor. Edwards distinguishes at least three senses in which philosophers speak of necessity, but the only

[12] The opening paragraphs of *Freedom of the Will* use mind and soul interchangeably.
[13] Cherry, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards: A Reappraisal* (16) describes Edwards' view: "To be sure, distinctions between the powers of the self are to be maintained. There are two basic powers: intellect, or the power of perception and speculation; and inclination or will, the power by which man chooses anything. Affections or emotions do not constitute a separate power or faculty; they are the lively, vigorous exercises of the will, man's choosing something at a high degree of like or dislike."
[14] "The will itself is not an agent that has a will: the power of choosing, itself, has not a power of choosing. That which has the power of volition or choice is the man or the soul, and not the power of volition itself" Edwards, *Freedom of the Will* 13 col. A.
[15] Edwards criticizes Arminians for applying the adjective "free" to person's will, rather than the person.

one that is really important for us is what he says about future necessities. Jenson explains:

> In that the past "necessarily" is what it is, the future will "necessarily" be what the past causes it to be. But this necessity is strictly of the philosophical sort; in speaking so, we are not speaking naturally and must always remind ourselves of that. If we do, we will not be betrayed into supposing that future events' necessity is of the sort that might be *imposed* by their causes, as if the past *made* the future be what it will be, perhaps in spite of us.[16]

Thus, necessity for Edwards is different than what we might have expected. Yes, there is a divine necessity: all things come to pass "necessarily" as far as God is concerned because he knows all the causes and their effects. The future is necessary, in that every future event must have a cause. There will be no uncaused events in the future. But as far as we are concerned, there is true freedom to choose according to desire. There are no natural impediments to doing what we desire. In this way, Edwards seeks to arrive at his goal of a "necessity that is not inconsistent with liberty."[17]

Philosophers also tinker with the ordinary meaning of contingency, turning it into a kind of pure chance. It is not simply that we are ignorant of the cause (as in the ordinary usage of the term), but that the event itself is uncaused. Obviously such a notion is absurd. Nothing cannot cause something. Again, Jenson summarizes Edwards' reasoning:

> That many events are contingent in the everyday sense is nothing to the Arminian purpose. An event genuinely contingent in the philosophic sense would have no reason why it should have occurred rather than some other; also "moral" causes must be excluded, so that to a "contingent"

[16] Jenson, *America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards*, 160. It should be noted that Edwards works with a Humean-type view of causality: a cause is an event conjoined by its effect, such that if x happens, y will also happen. However, Edwards departs from Hume (as we might expect) in that he grounds this connection between x and y in God.

[17] Edwards, *Freedom of the Will,* 9 col. A. This statement proves Edwards was indeed a compatibilist.

> choice motives would simply be irrelevant. In a world in which "contingent" events of this sort were to be expected, there could, Edwards points out, be no empirical knowledge at all, no "reasonings about the existence of things, past, present, or future," beyond "what we have by the most direct and immediate intuition."[18]

With these terminological difficulties squared away, it is easy to see how Edwards will deal with the term liberty. Once again, Edwards starts with the plain, ordinary meaning: liberty is "*The power, opportunity, or advantage, that any one has, to do as he pleases.* Or in other words, his being free from hindrance or impediment in the way of doing, or conducting in any respect as he wills."[19] But Edwards then accuses Arminians of creating artificial definitions of liberty, viewing it as the will's self-determination, or indifference, or contingence. We have already seen Edwards pick apart each of these candidates for liberty. In the end, Edwards does not believe we can assign any other meaning to liberty than the ordinary one, without creating linguistic confusion.

THE WILL AND VIRTUE

How will Edwards handle the Arminian charge that Calvinism reduces men to mere machines? Edwards is sensitive to this challenge and seeks to deal with it comprehensively. First, he defends his view of human nature:

> [T]he doctrine which I have endeavored to prove [does not make] men no more than mere machines…in that he has reason and understanding, with a faculty of Will, and so is capable of volition and choice; in that his Will is guided by the dictates or views of his understanding; and in that his external actions and behaviour, and in many respects also his thoughts, and the exercises of his mind, are subject to his Will; so that he has liberty to act according to his

[18] Jenson, *America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards*, 162.
[19] Edwards, *Freedom of the Will,* 11 col. A.

> choice, and do what he pleases; and by means of these things, is capable of moral habits and moral acts…[20]

Edwards' view is not reductionistic or mechanistic. In fact, he goes on to show that his view better preserves human responsibility than Arminianism. It is axiomatic for the Arminian that inability limits obligation. If one is unable to act, or unable to desist from an act, one is excused from performing or not performing the act. Arminians are unable to distinguish moral and natural inability.[21] But, since all will grant that natural inability limits obligation, for the Arminian, moral inability must limit obligation as well. The hardened criminal, who is unable to do moral good, would have to be recognized as innocent. If Arminians believe that an indifferent will is the only free will, then on Arminian principles, to the extent one is *motivated* to do some wicked act, one may be excused because it was not performed freely. The stronger the motivation is to act wickedly, the less responsible the person is! Conversely, the more one is motivated to do the good, the less one would be praiseworthy! Edwards saw (rightly, it seems) that, given an Arminian notion of freedom, moral chaos was sure to result.

CONCLUSION

If one has to pick a winner in the eighteenth century Arminian-Calvinist debate, it is hard to not choose Edwards. Certainly many of his arguments stand in need of refinement and there are some significant flaws in his presentation.[22] But criticisms

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[20] Ibid., 68 col. B.

[21] "We are said to be *naturally* unable to do a thing, when we can't do it if we will, because what is most commonly called nature [does not] allow…it, or because of some impeding defect or obstacle extrinsic to the will…*Moral* inability consists…either in want of inclination; or the strength of a contrary inclination; or the want of sufficient motives in view, to induce and excite the act of the will, or the strength of apparent motives to the contrary" Ibid., 11 col. A. In Edwards' view, we are not responsible for natural inability. For example, a man born blind is not held accountable for not being able to see. But we are morally responsible for our desires and inclinations, as well as the acts they produce.

[22] Several of these flaws are worth mentioning, though they cannot be explored here. Edwards' explanation of the will's relationship to the mind needs to be clarified, as was pointed out earlier in this paper. Related to this, he sometimes fails to distinguish the *act* of the will from the *state* of the will (or the movement of the will from the attitude of the will). His attempts to explain the origin of evil in the human will (i.e., how did a good creature come to desire evil?) are rather weak and contrived, at best. In addition there are many tensions in his thought that need to be ironed out. Within *Freedom of the Will*, there is a tension between the will as an active faculty and a passive faculty. In the larger corpus of Edwards' works there is also a tension between *Freedom of the Will* and *Original Sin* (in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*) that needs resolution. In *Freedom of the Will,* Edwards assumes our actions are causally determined by our desires in a common sense fashion. Desire, and the action flowing out of desire, share temporal continuity. However, in *Original Sin*, Edwards embraces the counter-intuitive view that, because we are continuously dependent

aside, on the whole, Edwards was able to demolish the Arminian arguments offered in his day. By paying close attention to how we use the key terms in ordinary discourse and by rigorously applying the principle of sufficient reason, he was able get the best of the interchange. But Edwards' concerns were much deeper than simply winning a polemical debate. His overarching aims were social and theological. He wanted to provide a firm basis for a moral community and wanted to make room for the grace of God to act on the human heart. He feared the Arminian notion of liberty would produce ethical nihilism in America because people would no longer be held accountable for doing what they claimed they could not help doing. He feared an Arminian view of the will would turn Christianity from a religion of grace into a religion of works. Insofar as social morality and theological soteriology remain relevant concerns, Edwards continues to be a significant figure. Whether we agree with his basic outlook or not, we ignore him at our own peril.

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on God for our ongoing existence, each successive moment is "equivalent to an *immediate* production out of nothing…[E]xistence at this moment is not merely in part from God, but wholly from him; and not in any part, or degree from its antecedent existence" (Ibid., 224 col. A). This view of "continuous creation *ex nihilo*" seems to be a radical break from the kind of causation and identity through time that Edwards presupposed in *Freedom of the Will*. It also seems to possibly undercut what Edwards says concerning human responsibility in *Freedom of the Will.* If Edwards' total position is to be persuasive, this apparent conflict must be removed.