

**The Freedom of the Will: An Inquiry into the Logic and Defenses of Jonathan Edwards**

Chloe Noller

Dr. Westblade

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Charles Spurgeon once preached a sermon entitled: “Free Will-A Slave.” Speaking on the utter lack of ability of anyone to do anything about their salvation without the Lord acting upon the human first, Spurgeon argues that, “Your fallen nature was put out of order; your will, amongst other things, has clean gone astray from God.”<sup>1</sup> Because of this, he says, “You would none of you come unto Christ of yourselves unless the Spirit that rested on Christ should draw you. It is true of all men in their natural condition that they will not come to Christ.”<sup>2</sup> If what Spurgeon argues is true, why are humans held responsible for not choosing to be saved? If Christ is the only one that can pull someone to himself, mankind should not be held liable for something it is wholly unable to do. It would appear that humans are held accountable even though they lack free choice. Jonathan Edwards, one of the greatest American theologians to ever live, had much to say about this topic. Writing a comprehensive theory of free will, Edwards was of the opinion that “A misunderstanding of the human will was at the root of nearly all that had gone wrong in theology.”<sup>3</sup> He believed that what one believed about the freedom of the will “established the moral system of the universe.” Edwards thought that the opposing determinist position not only promoted independence from God but that the result also “destroyed the very notion of conversion itself.”<sup>4</sup> He wrote, “[This notion] tends to prevent or enervate all prayer to God for converting grace; for why should men earnestly cry to God for his grace, to determine their hearts to that, which they must be determined to of themselves?”<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther seconded

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *Free-Will – A Slave*. The Spurgeon Center

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Michael J. McClymond, Michael James McClymond, and Gerald R. McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (OUP USA, 2012). 339.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *A Careful and Strict Enquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of That Freedom of Will, Which Is Supposed to Be Essential to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame*, A.M. London, 1790.

this assertion when he said, “If any man doth ascribe aught of salvation, even the very least, to the free will of a man, he knows nothing of grace, and he hath not learnt Jesus Christ aright.”<sup>6</sup>

During the early 18th century, the Puritan church was under attack by Arminian heresy. Arminianism, during that time, was described as “becoming in a sense not heresy but orthodoxy.”<sup>7</sup> The Arminian theologians believed in the idea of libertarian free will, something which they called “real freedom.”<sup>8</sup> This idea “views a free action as one in which a person is free to perform an action or refrain from performing it and is not completely determined in the matter by prior forces—nature, nurture, or even God.”<sup>9</sup> Clark Pinnock, a representative of this position, went on to note that “Free choices are choices that are not casually determined by conditions preceding them. It is the freedom of self-determination.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, nothing precedes an action of the will, and it is entirely independent of any outside impulse. The Arminians believed that man must have free choice, or else we cannot be held responsible for something we physically are unable to do otherwise.

The Arminian argument Edwards found to be “both incoherent and subject to infinite regress.”<sup>11</sup> He argues that the natural “result of the Arminian view of the will was a sense of self-righteousness: ‘thus our own holiness is from ourselves as its determining cause, and its original and highest source.’ The imputed righteousness of Christ did not contribute to human merit, since Arminians held that merit came through human self-determination. All told, then, ‘God is rather

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *Free-Will – A Slave*. The Spurgeon Center

<sup>7</sup> Michael J. McClymond, Michael James McClymond, and Gerald R. McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (OUP USA, 2012). 340.

<sup>8</sup> Justin Taylor, *A God Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards* (Crossway, 2004). 202

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

dependent on men in the affair,' and the glory goes 'wholly to men'"<sup>12</sup> Spurgeon agrees with this when he writes, "He who in his soul believes that man does of his own free-will turn to God, cannot have been taught of God, for that is one of the first principles taught us when God begins with us, that we have neither will nor power, but that he gives both; that he is "Alpha and Omega" in the salvation of men." Arminians believe that God does indeed elect some for salvation from fallen humanity before the foundation of the world, but does so in a way that is mediated by, or conditioned by, His foreknowledge of their genuinely free responses to the gospel. This is the Arminian way to maintain a commitment to predestination while also affirming free will and a significant role for human beings in their own salvation. The problem with this is that it makes no mention of the divinely sovereign orchestration of anything, merely just uses the word knowledge.

While Edwards agreed with libertarians that "we are only responsible for actions that are free and voluntary," he disagreed with what they found to be necessary for free action. Edwards wrote a devastating attack on libertarianism entitled *A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of That Freedom of the Will, Which is Supposed to Be Essential to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame*. In this, Edwards outlines a structured and extremely logical argument that proved to be incredibly effective against the idea of free will and that has yet to be successfully refuted. Edwards was careful to define the terms he used within his *Freedom of the Will*. In fact, by the time he had defined the terms that he used, he practically had made his entire argument. Edwards defined the will as 'that by which the mind

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<sup>12</sup> Michael J. McClymond, Michael James McClymond, and Gerald R. McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards*(OUP USA, 2012). 340.

chooses anything.”<sup>13</sup> He goes on to explain that, “The faculty of the will is the power of, or source in, the mind by which it is capable of choosing: an act of the will is the act of choosing or choice.”<sup>14</sup> Edwards even brings up Locke, quoting, “The will signifies nothing but a power or ability to prefer or choose.”<sup>15</sup> Edwards is also careful to make the point that “No one ever wills anything contrary to his desires, or desires anything contrary to his will.” He would argue that man is not free to choose against what he loves. The will always chooses its individual perception of the greatest apparent good. “The will is always determined by the strongest motive.” Motive he defined as “the whole of whatever it is...that moves, excites, or invites the mind to perform an act of volition.” Anything that stimulates the will to choose, to prefer something over something else, is a motive. These motives, regardless of their origin, are what instigated that choice.

“In every act of will there is an act of choice; in every volition there is a preference or prevailing inclination of the soul which at that moment takes the soul out of a state of perfect indifference with respect to the immediate object of the volition... Where there is absolutely no preferring or choosing—where there is nothing but an ongoing perfect equilibrium—there is no volition.”<sup>16</sup>

Edwards is arguing here that there is no such thing as a self-determined will. If there is no preferring or choosing, there is no ability to use one’s will.

“If the will chooses its choice or determines its own acts, it must be supposed to choose to choose this choice, and before it would have to choose to choose to choose that choice, and so *ad infinitum*. Therefore, the concept of freedom as self-determination either

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<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *A Careful and Strict Enquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of That Freedom of Will, Which Is Supposed to Be Essential to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame*, A.M. London, 1790. 1

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

contradicts itself by positing as an unchosen, (i.e., non-self-determined) choice or shuts itself wholly out of the world by an infinite regress.”<sup>17</sup>

To choose something is to prefer something. It’s impossible for any motive to spontaneously and inexplicably appear without a cause. The will cannot be indifferent because, in the act of volition, the mind has preferred one thing over another. “Nothing can encourage or invite the mind to will or act in any way except to the extent that it is perceived or is somehow in the mind’s view; for what is out of the mind’s view can’t affect the mind at all.”<sup>18</sup>

Edwards then moved on to define the term necessity, meaning “nothing different from certainty. In other words, when a thing “must be, and cannot be otherwise.”<sup>19</sup> Splitting this in half, he made the distinction between moral necessity and natural necessity. Moral necessity he defined as “the strength of inclination or motives, and the connection which there is in many cases between these, and such certain volitions and actions.” Moral necessity is what makes men unable to choose the high or moral good. By way of contrast, “Natural necessity is that which ‘men are under through the force of natural causes,’ such as physical compulsion or torture or threat of pain or lack of opportunity.” It’s something outside of the will that does not allow us to do that which we would like to do. Todd L. Adams, in his analysis of Edward’s argument, described it this way: “One that is compelled to act contrary to one’s will is not morally responsible. This is an example of natural necessity. On the other hand, if one is able to act according to one’s will, then the necessity involved is moral and not natural. The agent was able

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<sup>17</sup> Justin Taylor, *A God Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards* (Crossway, 2004). 204

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *A Careful and Strict Enquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of That Freedom of Will, Which Is Supposed to Be Essential to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame*, A.M. London, 1790.

<sup>19</sup> Michael J. McClymond, Michael James McClymond, and Gerald R. McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (OUP USA, 2012). 341.

to do as he pleased and is thus morally responsible.”<sup>20</sup> These distinctions also applied to the inability to act. Natural inability referred to the actions that cannot be accomplished even if the will desires to do so, and moral inability was the result of the “lack of proper inclination or motive required to produce the action.”<sup>21</sup>

It’s this natural and moral inability that gets at the heart of the debate over human responsibility. Edwards claims that “One with a moral inability is held responsible because his ability is not in question, but rather the motivation is the problem.” Edwards also claimed that “The genesis of how we come to will is irrelevant to freedom,” stating, “One is at liberty if he can do what he pleases (wills) and it makes no difference how the agent came to will what he did.”<sup>22</sup>

John Calvin agrees with Edward’s idea of distinction between necessity’s moral and natural sides. Calvin “points, as does Edwards, to the necessity that God always does what is good.”<sup>23</sup>

“But if anyone should sacrilegiously object, that little praise is due to God for his goodness, which he is constrained to preserve,— shall we not readily reply that his inability to do evil arises from his infinite goodness, and not from the impulse of violence? Therefore, a necessity of doing well impairs not the liberty of the Divine will in doing well; if the devil, who cannot but do evil, nevertheless sins voluntarily who then will assert that man sins less voluntarily; who then will assert that man sins less voluntarily, because he is under necessity of sinning?”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Todd L. Adams, “Tappan vs. Edwards on the Freedom Necessary for Moral Responsibility.” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 40, no. 2 (2004) 322.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> Justin Taylor, *A God Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards* (Crossway, 2004). 202

<sup>24</sup> John Calvin, John Allen, Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, and Thomas Clinton. Pears. *Institutes of the Christian Religion / by John Calvin ; Translated from the Latin and Collated with the Author’s Last Edition in French by John Allen*. Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1949. 318

This idea, Edwards charged, makes a mess of Arminian theology. He argued that “Arminians must concede that God “can’t avoid being holy and good, and is therefore under necessity in a moral sense.”<sup>25</sup> He also attacked the logic of the Arminian argument, saying that

“When man has been taught that no good thing remains in his power, and that he is hedged about on all sides by most miserable necessity, in spite of this he should nevertheless be instructed to aspire to a good of which he is empty, to a freedom of which he has been deprived. In fact, he may thus be more sharply aroused from inactivity than if it were supposed that he was endowed with the highest virtues.”<sup>26</sup>

Calvin viewed the ability to will anything good as an advantage, and anything evil, as a defect.

Humans simply had the power to will, and attributed “to will what is evil, to corrupt nature; to

will what is good, to grace.”<sup>27</sup> “The will, therefore, is so bound by the slavery of sin, that it

cannot excite itself, much less devote itself to anything good; for such a disposition is the

beginning of a conversion to God, which in the Scriptures is attributed solely to Divine grace.”<sup>28</sup>

Edwards strongly believed that the Arminian insistence on human moral autonomy undermined not only predestination but providence as well, disconnecting God from human

history. Too much moral autonomy places humans in a deistic position. Spurgeon noted,

“Anyone who believes that man’s will is entirely free, and that he can be saved by it, does not

believe in the fall...[it] did not leave one power unimpaired; they were all shattered, and debased

and tarnished; like some mighty temple, the pillars might be there, the shaft, and the column, and

the pilaster might be there; but they were all broken...the will, too, is not exempt.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> John Calvin, John Allen, Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, and Thomas Clinton. Pears. *Institutes of the Christian Religion / by John Calvin ; Translated from the Latin and Collated with the Author’s Last Edition in French by John Allen*. Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1949. 318

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *Free-Will – A Slave*. The Spurgeon Center



Edwards argued that not only was the libertarian argument of free will illogical, it drastically undermined the Christian faith and the sovereignty of God. Edwards believed that every action had a prior motive that moved the will to choose or prefer one thing over another. But, he contended, “One is at liberty if he can do as he pleases (wills) and it makes no difference how the agent came to will what he did.” Edwards was so careful to distinguish moral from natural necessity, for those necessities were what held someone responsible for their actions or not. “An agent is responsible because he could have done otherwise if he had willed otherwise—he had the ability to do other than he did.” That is what it means to be morally responsible for actions. Ephesians 2 talks about the state of a human being before being acted upon by salvation. Paul writes, “And you were dead in the trespasses in which you once walked, following the course of this world...and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.”<sup>30</sup>

Without motives, humans simply could not make a choice. There must be something that motivates volition and action. That volition and action must have a starting point, and that motive must be sovereignly orchestrated by God. If this were not so, it would mean that Salvation would be up to mankind’s work alone, and completely independent of any grace on the part of Jesus Christ. This is not what it means to be a Christian. I think Edwards wrote a very convincing and sound argument for the freedom of the will and the sovereignty of God. Edwards in no way answers every question that this logic leads us to, and there is so much more that I could write on concerning this topic. As with anything relating to God, however, we must

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<sup>30</sup> Ephesians 2:1-2a, 3b-5

exercise faith that the Lord, in his perfect wisdom, knows exactly what he is doing. 1 Corinthians 1:18-19 was of great comfort to me as I wrestled with these questions in my research. “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate....Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:18-19, 22-23a

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