

Module 410: Jonathan Edwards

Freedom of the Will, by Jonathan Edwards. Excerpted and introduced by Dan Graves.

“A strong habit of virtue, and a great degree of holiness, may cause a moral Inability to love wickedness in general, and may render a man unable to take complacency in wicked persons or things; or to choose a wicked in preference to a virtuous life.”

Introduction to Jonathan Edwards Module.

Jonathan Edwards is generally considered the greatest of the American Puritan theologians and philosophers. He was born in 1703, a grandson of the famous Congregationalist preacher Solomon Stoddard. Edwards had a tremendous aptitude for learning and was deeply interested in questions not only theology but of science, philosophy, and psychology.

Like his grandfather and father, Edwards became a preacher. His sermons (of which one of the best-known today is “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”) had a deep effect on people. He was one of the major contributors to and defenders of a great revival of religion which swept New England in his day, and a supporter of George Whitfield’s work.

Despite his character and fame, his church at Northampton wearied of him and his godly but fashionable wife Sarah, and dismissed him after a lengthy controversy over the sacraments. He became a missionary to the Indians and, at the end of his life, accepted the presidency of the College of New Jersey (Princeton). He died of smallpox.

In theology, Edwards took the Calvinist, or deterministic position. His treatise on Free Will is a lengthy argument against Arminian theology. Arminians hold that a man has at least a small say in his own salvation or damnation.

Part I Section I: Concerning the Nature of the Will

It may possibly be thought, that there is no great need of going about to define or describe the Will; this word being generally as well understood as any other words we can use to explain it: and so perhaps it would be, had not philosophers, metaphysicians, and polemic divines, brought the matter into obscurity by the things they have said of it. But since it is so, I think it may be of some use, and will tend to greater clearness in The following discourse, to say a few things concerning it.

And therefore I observe, that the Will (without any metaphysical refining) is, That by which the mind chooses any thing. The faculty of the will, is that power, or principle of mind, by which it is capable of choosing: an act of the will is the same as an act of choosing or choice...

Part I Section II: Concerning the Determination of the Will

By determining the Will, if the phrase be used with any meaning, must be intended, causing that the act of the Will or choice should be thus, and not otherwise: and the Will is said to be determined, when, in consequence of some action, or influence, its choice is directed to, and fixed upon a particular object. As when we speak of the determination of motion, we mean causing the motion of the body to be in such a direction, rather than another.

The Determination of the Will, supposes an effect, which must have a cause. If the Will be determined, there is a Determiner. This must be supposed to be intended even by them that say, The Will determines itself. If it be so, the Will is both Determiner and determined; it is a cause that acts and produces effects upon itself, and is the object of its own influence and action...

It is sufficient to my present purpose to say, It is that

motive, which, as it stands in view of the mind, is the strongest, that determines the will. But may be necessary that I should a little explain my meaning.

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. Many particular things may concur, and unite their strength, to induce the mind; and when it is so, all together are as one complex motive. And when I speak of the strongest motive, I have respect to the strength of the whole that operates to induce a particular act of volition, whether that be the strength of one thing alone, or of many together.

Part I Section IV: Of the Distinctions of Natural and Moral Necessity, and Inability

To give some instances of this moral Inability.— A woman of great honor and chastity may have a moral Inability to prostitute herself to her slave. A child of great love and duty to his parents, may be thus unable to kill his father. A very lascivious man, in case of certain opportunities and temptations, and in the absence of such and such restraints, may be unable to forbear gratifying his lust. A drunkard, under such and such circumstances, may be unable to forbear taking strong drink. A very malicious man may be unable to exert benevolent acts to an enemy, or to desire his prosperity; yea, some may be so under the power of a vile disposition, that they may be unable to love those who are most worthy of their esteem and affection. A strong habit of virtue, and a great degree of holiness, may cause a moral Inability to love wickedness in general, and may render a man unable to take complacence in wicked persons or things; or to choose a wicked in preference to a virtuous life. And on the other hand, a great degree of habitual wickedness may lay a man under an Inability to love and choose holiness; and render him utterly unable to love an infinitely holy Being, or to choose and cleave to him as his chief good.

Part I Section V: Concerning the Notion of Liberty, and of Moral Agency

The plain and obvious meaning of the words Freedom and Liberty, in common speech, 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...

What has been said may be sufficient to show what is meant by Liberty, according to the common notions of mankind, and in the usual and primary acceptance of the word: but the word, as used by Arminians, Pelagians, and others, who oppose the Calvinists, has an entirely different signification.— These several things belong to their notion of Liberty. 1. That it consists in a self-determining power in the Will, or a certain sovereignty the Will has over itself, and its own acts, whereby it determines its own volitions; so as not to be dependent, in its determinations, on any cause without itself, nor determined by any thing prior to its own acts. 2. Indifference belongs to Liberty in their notion of it, or that the mind, previous to the act of volition, be in equilibria. 3. Contingence is another thing that belongs and is essential to it; not in the common acceptance of the word, as that has been already explained, but as opposed to all necessity, or any fixed and certain connexion with some previous ground or reason of its existence. They suppose the essence of Liberty so much to consist in these things, that unless the will of man be free in this sense, he has no real freedom, how much soever, he may be at Liberty to act according to his will.

Part II Section IV

Let us suppose, as these divines do, that there are no acts of the soul, strictly speaking, but free Volitions; then it will follow, that the soul is an active being in nothing further than it is a voluntary or elective being; and when ever it produces effects actively, it produces effects voluntarily and electively. But to produce effects thus, is the same thing as

to produce effects in consequence of, and according to its own choice. And if so, then surely the soul does not by its activity produce all its own acts of will or choice themselves; for this, by the supposition, is to produce all its free acts of choice volutarily an electively or in consequence of its own free acts of choice, which brings the matter directly to the forementioned contradiction, of a free act of choice before the first free act of choice.— According to these gentlemen's own notion of action, if there arises in the mind a Volition without a free act of the Will to produce it, the mind is not the voluntary Cause of that Volition; because it does not arise from, nor is regulated by, choice or design. And therefore it cannot be, that the mind should be the active, voluntary, determining Cause of the first and leading Volition that relates to the affair.— The mind being a designing Cause, only enables it to produce effects in consequence of its design; it will not enable it to be the designing Cause of all its own designs. The mind being an elective Cause, will enable it to produce effects only in consequence of its elections, and according to them; but cannot enable it to be the elective Cause of all its own elections; because that supposes an election before the first election. So the mind being an active Cause enables it to produce effects in consequence of its own acts, but cannot enable it to be the determining Cause of all its own acts; for that is, in the same manner, a contradiction; as it supposes a determining act conversant about the first act, and prior to it, having a causal influence on its existence, and manner of existence...

So that let Arminians turn which way they please with their notion of liberty, consisting in the Will determining its own acts, their notion destroys itself. If they hold every free act of Will to be determined by the soul's own free choice, or foregoing free act of Will; forgoing, either in the order of time, or nature; it implies that gross contradiction, that the first free act belonging to the affair, is determined by a free act which is before it. Or if they say, that the free acts of the Will are determined by some other art of the soul, and not

an act of will or choice; this also destroys their notion of liberty consisting in the acts of the Will being determined by the will itself; or if they hold that the acts of the Will are determined by nothing at all that is prior to them, but that they are contingent in that sense, that they are determined and fixed by no cause at all; this also destroys their notion of liberty, consisting in the Will determining its own acts.

Part II Section XII

Having proved, that God has a certain and infallible Prescience of the voluntary acts of moral agents, I come now, in the second place, to show the consequence; how it follows from hence, that these events are necessary, with a Necessity of connexion or consequence.

The chief Arminian divines, so far as I have had opportunity to observe, deny this consequence; and affirm, that if such Foreknowledge be allowed, it is no evidence of any necessity of the event foreknown. Now I desire, that this matter may be particularly and thoroughly inquired into. I cannot but think that on particular and full consideration, it may be perfectly determined, whether it be indeed so or not...

But if there be any future event, whose existence is contingent, without all Necessity, the future existence of the event is absolutely without evidence. If there be any evidence of it, it must be one of these two sorts, either self-evidence or proof; an evident thing must be either evident in itself; or evident in something else: that is, evident by connexion with something else....

I would observe one thing further; that if it be as those forementioned writers suppose, that God's Foreknowledge is not the cause, but the effect of the existence of the event foreknown; this is so far from showing that this Foreknowledge doth not infer the Necessity of the existence of that event, that it rather shows the contrary the more plainly. Because it shows the existence of the event to be so

settled and firm, that it is as if it had already been; inasmuch as in effect it actually exists already; its future existence has already had actual influence and efficiency, and has produced an effect...

Part III Section IV Command and Obligation to Obedience, consistent with moral Inability to obey.

A person, whose strength is no more than sufficient to lift the weight of one hundred pounds, is as truly and really unable to lift one hundred and one pounds, as ten thousand pounds; but yet he is further from being able to lift the latter weight than the former; and so, according to the common use of speech, has a greater Inability for it. So it is in moral Inability. A man is truly morally unable to choose contrary to a present inclination, which in the least degree prevails; or, contrary to that motive, which, all things considered, has strength and advantage now to move the Will, in the least degree, superior to all other motives in view: but yet he is further from ability to insist a very strong habit, and a violent and deeply rooted inclination, or a motive vastly exceeding all others in strength. And again, the Inability may, in some respects, be called greater in some instances than others, as it may be more general and extensive to all acts of that kind. So men may be said to be unable in a different sense, and to be further from moral ability, who have that moral Inability which is general and habitual, than they who have only that Inability which is occasional and particular. Thus in cases of natural inability; he that is born blind may be said to be unable to see, in a different manner, and is, in some respects, further from being able to see, than he whose sight is hindered by a transient cloud or mist.

PART III Section V. That Sincerity of Desires and Endeavors, which, is supposed to excuse in the non-performance of things in themselves good, particularly considered.

So, a man of an exceedingly corrupt and wicked heart, who

has no love to God and Jesus Christ, but, on the contrary, being very profanely and carnally inclined, has the greatest distaste of the things of religion, and enmity against them; yet being of a family, that, from one generation to another, have most of them died, in youth, of an hereditary consumption; and so having little hope of living long; and having been instructed in the necessity of a supreme love to Christ, and latitude for his death and sufferings, in order to his salvation from eternal misery; if under these circumstances he should, through fear of eternal torments, wish he had such a disposition; but his profane and carnal heart remaining, he continues still in his habitual distaste of; and enmity to God and religion, and wholly without any exercise of that love and gratitude, (as doubtless the very devils themselves, notwithstanding all the devilishness of their temper, would wish for a holy heart, if by that means they could get out of hell) in this case, there is no sincere Willingness to love Christ and choose him as his chief good: these holy dispositions and exercises are not at all the direct object of the Will: they truly share no part of the inclination or desire of the soul; but all is terminated on deliverance from torment: and these graces and pious volitions, notwithstanding this forced consent, are looked upon as in themselves undesirable; as when a sick man desires a dose he greatly abhors, in order to save his life.

Discussion Starters

According to Edwards, what is the will?

What role does Edwards see motives as playing in our decisions?

Why is it important to develop godly habits?

Must God's foreknowledge compel the outcome of an event?

Does wanting the right thing for the wrong reason have any merit?

Does the Bible write as if humans have free will? If yes, in what sense?