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Freedom of the Will (Doctrine)

Edwards's views on the nature of the human will demonstrate his unique ability to unite philosophical rigor and theological fervor. Edwards was a staunch defender of the Reformed doctrines of absolute divine sovereignty and meticulous providence, but he was also a proponent of the intellectual tools and methods of early modern philosophy (and of John Locke in particular). His ultimate statement of his doctrinal position, *Freedom of the Will*, is the masterful result of these dual commitments. Edwards is often referred to as America's greatest philosopher-theologian, and this would probably still be accurate even if he had only written *Freedom of the Will* (WJE 1:2). Even so, there is much in his larger corpus pertaining to the topic, as for example "Paper on Free Will" (WJEO 28) and "Book of Minutes on the Arminian Controversy" (WJEO 37); numerous sermons; and *Remarks on the Essays on the Principles of Morality, and Natural Religion*, a refutation of Lord Kames's attempt to use Edwards's arguments in support of his own.

The neo-Calvinistic Reformed theology that Edwards advocated was the dominant view in Puritan New England, but by the mid-1700s it was coming under attack from Arminian dissenters. The earliest criticisms came from "the great Puritan nemesis, Anglicanism" (Marsden 2003: 35), but the dissenters included younger members of friendlier camps as well (Hall 2006: 69). Arminianism (like Calvinism) was far from monolithic, but the relationship between human freedom and divine sovereignty was the primary issue that separated the two theological systems. Thus, Edwards used "Arminianism" as an umbrella term to describe anyone who claimed that human agency played an essential role in the choice to accept God's grace (Harris 2005: 109; cf. Marsden 2003: 86).

Edwards viewed Arminianism in general as a threat to true religion, but the bulk of this threat traced back to the Arminian view of freedom. If their view of freedom was correct, then they had a beachhead from which they could launch all manner of attacks on Calvinism. Thus, Edwards wrote in *Original Sin*, "if modern divines ... can maintain their peculiar notion of freedom, consisting in the *self-determining power* of the will, as necessary to moral agency ..., then they have an impregnable castle, to which they may repair, and remain invincible, in all the controversies they have with the reformed divines, concerning *original sin*, the *sovereignty* of grace, election ..., and other principles of the like kind (WJE 3:376).

While eighteenth-century theologians were wondering whether divine sovereignty might undermine human freedom, some eighteenth-century philosophers, following Hobbes, were entertaining parallel concerns about causal determinism. (Edwards, like most of his philosophical contemporaries, understood "cause" to mean "sufficient cause"; on this view, we cannot call something a cause unless it guarantees its effect.) This philosophical discussion of causal necessitation led to a distinction between natural and moral necessity (Harris 2005: 7) that Edwards appropriated and developed in *Freedom of the Will*. In fact, Guelzo (2007: 75) argues that this is the most important distinction Edwards makes in the book.

Most philosophers who relied on this distinction between moral necessity and natural necessity treated moral necessitation as a different kind of relation from natural necessitation. Whereas natural necessitation eliminated alternatives, moral "necessitation"

did not. Instead, the notion of moral necessity was an attempt to represent the influence of motives on free choice. Determinists such as Hobbes rejected this distinction, because it seemed equivalent to saying that a free choice both has a cause (which, recall, means “sufficient cause”) and does not have a cause. Edwards, recognizing this problem, claimed that moral necessity consisted of the same (sufficient) causal relation as natural necessity, but different *relata* (Harris 2005: 121). Moral necessity arises from “moral causes” such as the strength of a motive. Edwards’s innovation was that moral necessitation eliminated alternatives but *without eliminating freedom of the will*.

Edwards framed his view of the freedom of the will by defining some important terms. The *will* is the mental faculty that gives us the power to make choices, and it is determined by the strongest motive. In other words, we always choose what appears to us as the greatest good. A *necessary* event is one that frustrates opposing desires—i.e., an event that will occur even if someone wants it not to occur. Some events are necessary only with respect to a particular person’s desires, and some events are necessary in general: necessary with respect to all actual and potential desires. (And as we saw above, Edwards focuses on *moral* necessity as distinct from *natural* necessity.) According to the commonsense concept of *freedom* (or *liberty*), having freedom simply means having the power to translate volition into choice: having the power to do what one wills is sufficient for freedom. And finally, *moral agents* are characterized by 1) being capable of moral (or immoral) choices; 2) having a sense of good, evil, moral desert, and related concepts; and 3) being sensitive to moral persuasion.

The Arminians, as Edwards characterized them, thought that doing what one wills was necessary for freedom, but not sufficient. The Arminians added further conditions on freedom, which can be summarized as follows:

1. The will must determine itself.
2. The will must *not* be determined by anything outside itself.
3. Choices must be made in a state of indifference.

Edwards argues, forcefully and relentlessly, that these requirements render the Arminian concept of freedom incoherent. First, he rejects the self-determination requirement because it leads to an unacceptable infinite regress of choices.

Considering the second requirement, and the question of whether choices can be determined by something external to the will, Edwards presented the Arminian with a dilemma: Any given action is either caused or not. If it is caused, then it is necessitated, which means it cannot be free by Arminian lights. But if an action is not caused, then it is not connected with any ground or reason and thus cannot be free (according to an intuitive and plausible notion of freedom). Thus, it appears that nobody has—or even *could* have—the type of freedom that the Arminian insists upon.

And finally, Edwards also argued that the indifference requirement cannot be met. An action is by definition the expression of a preference, and expressing a preference is inconsistent with being in a state of indifference.

Edwards also pointed out some practical and theological difficulties with Arminian doctrine. Arminians claimed that moral agency, moral responsibility, and associated practices such as praise and blame all require freedom from necessity. But if that is true, then believers cannot praise God for his actions (nor can Jesus Christ be praised for his actions). Arminians also claimed that moral inability is an excuse: if someone is unable to do something, then she is not responsible for failing to do that thing. One implication of this claim, when considered in light of original sin, is that God cannot require perfection: he cannot hold people responsible for falling short of perfect obedience to his laws. This

led some Arminians to propose that God had substituted a new law, which only required imperfect obedience. The problem with this proposal, though, was that it seemed to make grace unnecessary. If human inability to keep the old law somehow obligated God to provide a new law that humans *are* able to keep, then why would Christ need to die for human inability to keep the old law? And finally, the Arminian commitment to indifference seemed to sever the connections between virtues (or vices), character traits, and motives. If someone is strongly inclined toward right action, that is usually seen as a reason for praise; but if indifference is required for moral agency, then a person should not be praised (or blamed) for being strongly inclined in their actions.

Having identified various problems with specific Arminian doctrines, Edwards then criticized their reasoning in support of those doctrines. Their claim that virtue and vice reside in the causal origin of an act, rather than in its nature, was inconsistent with their requirement that the original cause of a free action be uncaused (since there is no other place for virtue and vice to reside but in the nature of that first cause). Their claim that the will could not be a passive effect, and thus could not be determined by an extrinsic cause, was inconsistent with their requirement that the will determine itself (because a self-determined will would be a passive effect of itself).

Edwards also argued that three common Arminian complaints against Calvinism actually applied with equal or greater force to the Arminian position. First, Arminians claimed to be on the side of common sense—but neither common usage nor social practices adhered to their view of freedom. Second, they claimed that there was no point in striving for virtue if human actions were necessitated—but there also did not seem to be much point in striving for virtue if actions were not reliably connected to intentions. Third, Arminians claimed that necessary causes turned humans into machines—but even if this was true (and Edwards argued that it was not) it was arguably better to be a finely crafted machine than to be “left to the guidance of nothing but absolute blind contingency” (WJE 1:154).

Hopefully this brief summary offers a glimpse into the power and scope of Edwards’s argumentative abilities. Even though *Freedom of the Will* was primarily a polemic against eighteenth-century Arminianism, there are two broader implications worth emphasizing. First, as Harris (2005: 121) points out, if Edwards’s argument against Arminianism succeeded, then it was in effect an argument *for* Calvinism. If the Arminian conditions on freedom were incoherent, then that gave good reason to think that no such conditions were necessary for freedom (i.e., that the Calvinist concept of freedom was the correct one). And finally, Edwards’s use of early modern philosophy’s tools and methods may have produced a view that was less orthodox than it seems. As Oliver Crisp (2015: 106) points out, recent Edwards scholarship has opened up an intriguing question: Was Edwards merely defending a traditional Reformed theology, or did he develop a novel account of theological determinism that departed from both his theological and philosophical traditions? GARRETT PENDERGRAFT

FURTHER READING

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