

Freedom of the Will

An 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

by the late

Rev. Jonathan Edwards
President of the College of New Jersey



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P R E F A C E.

MANY find much fault with the calling professing Christians, that differ one from another in some matters of opinion, by distinct *names*; especially calling them by the names of particular men, who have distinguished themselves as maintainers and promoters of those opinions: as the calling some professing Christians Arminians, from Arminius; others Arians, from Arius; others Socinians, from Socinus, and the like. They think it unjust in itself; as it seems to suppose and suggest, that the persons marked out by these names received those doctrines which they entertain, out of regard *to*, and reliance *on*, those men after whom they are named, as though they made them their rule; in the same manner as the followers of Christ are called Christians, after his name, whom they regard and depend upon as their great head and rule,—whereas, this is an unjust and groundless imputation on those that go under the fore-mentioned denominations. Thus (say they) there is not the least ground to suppose, that the chief divines who embrace the scheme of doctrine which is, by many, called Arminianism, believe it the more, because Arminius believed it: and that there is no reason to think any other, than that they sincerely and impar-

tially study the holy Scriptures, and enquire after the mind of Christ, with as much judgment and sincerity as any of those that call them by these names; that they seek after truths, and are not careful whether they think exactly as Arminius did; yea, that in some things they actually differ from him. This practice is also esteemed actually injurious on this account, that it is supposed naturally to lead the multitude to imagine the difference between persons thus named and others to be greater than it is; yea, as though it were so great, that they must be, as it were, another species of beings. And they object against it as arising from an uncharitable, narrow, contracted spirit, which, they say, commonly inclines persons to confine all that is good to themselves and their own party, and to make a wide distinction between themselves and others, and stigmatise those that differ from them with odious names. They say, moreover, that the keeping up such a distinction of names has a direct tendency to uphold distance and disaffection, and keep alive mutual hatred among Christians, who ought all to be united in friendship and charity, however they cannot in all things think alike.

I confess, these things are very plausible. And I will not deny, that there are some unhappy consequences of this distinction of names, and that men's infirmities and evil dispositions often make an ill improvement of it. But yet I humbly conceive these objections are carried far beyond reason. The generality of mankind are disposed enough, and a great deal too much, to uncharitableness, and to be censorious and bitter towards those that differ from them

in religious opinions; which evil temper of mind will take occasion to exert itself from many things in themselves innocent, useful, and necessary. But yet there is no necessity to suppose, that the thus distinguishing persons of different opinions by different names, arises mainly from an uncharitable spirit. It may arise from the disposition there is in mankind (whom God has distinguished with an ability and inclination for speech) to improve the benefit of language, in the proper use and design of names, given to things which they have often occasion to speak of, or signify their minds about; which is to enable them to express their ideas with ease and expedition, without being encumbered with an obscure and difficult circumlocution. And the thus distinguishing persons of different opinions in religious matters may not imply, nor infer, any more than that there is a difference, and that the difference is such as we find we have often occasion to take notice of, and make mention of, that which we have frequent occasion to speak of (whatever it be that gives the occasion), this wants a name: and it is always a defect in language, in such cases, to be obliged to make use of a description instead of a name. Thus we have often occasion to speak of those who are the descendants of the ancient inhabitants of France, who were subjects or heads of the government of that land, and spake the language peculiar to it; in distinction from the descendants of the inhabitants of Spain, who belonged to that community, and spake the language of that country. And therefore we find the great need of distinct names to signify these different sorts of people, and the great convenience of those distin-

guishing words, *French* and *Spaniards*; by which the signification of our minds is quick and easy, and our speech is delivered from the burden of a continual reiteration of diffuse descriptions, with which it must otherwise be embarrassed.

That the difference of the opinions of those who, in their general scheme of divinity, agree with these two noted men, Calvin and Arminius, is a thing there is often occasion to speak of, is what the practice of the latter itself confesses; who are often, in their discourses and writings, taking notice of the supposed absurd and pernicious opinions of the former sort. And therefore the making use of different names in this case cannot reasonably be objected against, or condemned, as a thing which must come from so bad a cause as they assign. It is easy to be accounted for, without supposing it to arise from any other source than the exigence and natural tendency of the state of things; considering the faculty and disposition God has given to mankind, to express things which they have frequent occasion to mention. by certain distinguishing names. It is an effect that is similar to what we see arise, in innumerable cases which are parallel, where the cause is not at all blameworthy.

Nevertheless, at first, I had thoughts of carefully avoiding the use of the appellation *Arminian* in this treatise. But I soon found I should be put to great difficulty by it; and that my discourse would be so encumbered with an often-repeated circumlocution, instead of a name, which would express the thing intended as well and better, that I altered my purpose. And therefore I must ask the excuse of such as are

apt to be offended with things of this nature, that I have so freely used the term *Arminian* in the following discourse. I profess it to be without any design to stigmatise persons of any sort with a name of reproach, or at all to make them appear more odious. If, when I had occasion to speak of those divines who are commonly called by this name, I had, instead of styling them Arminians, called them *these men*, as Dr Whitby does Calvinistic divines, it probably would not have been taken any better, or thought to show a better temper or more good manners. I have done as I would be done by in this matter. However, the term *Calvinistic* is, in these days, among most, a term of greater reproach than the term *Arminian*, yet I should not take it at all amiss to be called a Calvinist, for distinction's sake; though I utterly disclaim a dependence on Calvin, or believing the doctrines which I hold, because he believed and taught them, and cannot justly be charged with believing in every thing just as he taught.

But, lest I should really be an occasion of injury to some persons, I would here give notice, that though I generally speak of that doctrine, concerning free will and moral agency, which I oppose, as an Arminian doctrine; yet I would not be understood as asserting, that every divine or author whom I have occasion to mention as maintaining that doctrine, was properly an Arminian, or one of that sort which is commonly called by that name. Some of them went far beyond the Arminians; and I would by no means charge Arminians in general with all the corrupt doctrine which these maintained. Thus, for instance, it would be very injurious, if I should rank

Arminian divines in general with such authors as Mr Chubb. I doubt not many of them have some of his doctrines in abhorrence; though he agrees, for the most part, with Arminians in his notion of the freedom of the will. And, on the other hand, though I suppose this notion to be a leading article in the Arminian scheme, that which, if pursued in its consequences, will truly infer, or naturally lead to all the rest; yet I do not charge all that have held this doctrine with being Arminians. For whatever may be the consequences of the doctrine really, yet some that hold this doctrine may not own nor see these consequences; and it would be unjust, in many instances, to charge every author with believing and maintaining all the real consequences of his avowed doctrines. And I desire it may be particularly noted, that though I have occasion, in the following discourse, often to mention the author of the book, entitled “An Essay on the Freedom of the Will in God and the Creature,” as holding that notion of freedom of will which I oppose; yet I do not mean to call him an Arminian, however in that doctrine he agrees with Arminians, and departs from the current and general opinion of Calvinists. If the author of that Essay be the same as it is commonly ascribed to, he, doubtless, was not one that ought to bear that name. But however good a divine he was in many respects, yet that particular Arminian doctrine which he maintained is never the better for being held by such an one, nor is there less need of opposing it on that account; but rather is there the more need of it; as it will be likely to have the more pernicious influence, for being taught by a divine of his name and character; sup-

posing the doctrine to be wrong, and in itself to be of an ill tendency.

I have nothing further to say by way of preface, but only to bespeak the reader's candour and calm attention to what I have written. The subject 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 has its foundation in God's nature and ours, and in the relation that God and we stand 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 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 *demand*s the attention of Christians, and especially of divines. But as to my manner of handling the subject, I will be far from presuming to say, that it is such as *demand*s the attention of the reader to what I have written. I am ready to own that in this matter I depend on the reader's *courtesy*.

But only thus far I may have some colour for putting in a *claim*; that if the reader be disposed to pass his censure on what I have written, I may be fully and patiently heard, and well attended to, before I am condemned. However, this is what I would humbly *ask* of my readers, together with the prayers of all sincere lovers of truth, that I may have much of that Spirit which Christ promised his disciples, which guides into all truth: and that the blessed and powerful influences of this Spirit would make truth victorious in the world.

CONTENTS.

PART I.

WHEREIN ARE EXPLAINED VARIOUS TERMS AND THINGS
BELONGING TO THE SUBJECT OF THE ENSUING DIS-
COURSE.

SECT.	PAGE.
I. Concerning the Nature of the Will,	1
II. Concerning the Determination of the Will,	5
III. Concerning the Meaning of the Terms Necessity, Impossibility, Inability, &c., and of Contingence,	15
IV. Of the Distinction of Natural and Moral Necessity and Inability,	23
V. Concerning the Notion of Liberty and of Moral Agency,	30

PART II.

WHEREIN IT IS CONSIDERED, WHETHER THERE IS OR
CAN BE ANY SUCH SORT OF FREEDOM OF WILL AS
THAT WHEREIN ARMINIANS PLACE THE ESSENCE OF
THE LIBERTY OF ALL MORAL AGENTS; AND WHETHER
ANY SUCH THING EVER WAS OR CAN BE CONCEIVED OF.

I. Showing the manifest Inconsistence of the Armi- nian Notion of Liberty of Will consisting in the Will's Self-Determining Power,	36
II. Several supposed ways of evading the foregoing Reasoning considered,	41
III. Whether any Event whatsoever, and Volition in particular, can come to pass without a Cause of its Existence,	47
IV. Whether Volition can arise without a Cause, through the Activity of the Nature of the Soul,	54
V. Showing that if the Things asserted in these Eva- sions should be supposed to be true, they are altogether impertinent, and cannot help the Cause of Arminian Liberty; and how, this being the state of the case, Arminian Writers are obliged to talk inconsistently,	58

SECTION.	PAGE.
VI. Concerning the Will's determining in things which are perfectly indifferent in the view of the Mind,	63
VII. Concerning the Notion of Liberty of Will consisting in Indifference,	71
VIII. Concerning the supposed Liberty of the Will, as opposite to all Necessity,	82
IX. Of the Connexion of the Acts of the Will with the Dictates of the Understanding,	86
X. Volition necessarily connected with the Influence of Motives. With particular Observation of the great inconsistency of Mr Chubb's Assertions and Reasonings about the Freedom of the Will,	95
XI. The Evidence of God's certain Foreknowledge of the Volitions of Moral Agents,	111
XII. God's certain Foreknowledge of the future Volitions of Moral Agents inconsistent with such a Contingence of those Volitions as is without all Necessity; and infers a Necessity of Volition, as much as an absolute Decree,	133
XIII. Whether we suppose the Volitions of Moral Agents to be connected with any thing antecedent or not, yet they must be necessary, in such a sense as to overthrow Arminian Liberty,	148

PART III.

WHEREIN IS INQUIRED WHETHER ANY SUCH LIBERTY OF WILL AS ARMINIANS HOLD BE NECESSARY TO MORAL AGENCY, VIRTUE AND VICE, PRAISE AND DISPRAISE, &C.

I. God's moral Excellency necessary, yet virtuous and praiseworthy,	152
II. The Acts of the Will of the human soul of Jesus Christ necessarily holy, yet virtuous, praiseworthy, rewardable, &c.	156
III. The case of such as are given up of God to Sin, and of fallen Man in general, proves moral Necessity and Inability to be consistent with Blameworthiness,	172
IV. Command and Obligation to Obedience consistent with moral Inability to obey,	180

SECTION.	PAGE.
V. That Sincerity of Desires and Endeavours, which is supposed to excuse in the Non-performance of Things in themselves good, particularly considered,	192
VI. Liberty of Indifference, not only not necessary to Virtue, but utterly inconsistent with it; and all, either virtuous or vicious Habits or Inclinations, inconsistent with Arminian Notions of Liberty and Moral Agency,	201
VII. Arminian Notions of Moral Agency inconsistent with all Influence of Motive and Inducement, in either virtuous or vicious Actions,	210

PART IV.

WHEREIN THE CHIEF GROUNDS OF THE REASONINGS
OF ARMINIANS, IN SUPPORT AND DEFENCE OF THEIR
NOTIONS OF LIBERTY, MORAL AGENCY, ETC., AND
AGAINST THE OPPOSITE DOCTRINE, ARE CONSIDERED.

I. The Essence of the Virtue and Vice of the Dispositions of the Heart, and Acts of the Will, lies not in their Causes, but their Nature,	217
II. The Falseness and Inconsistence of that metaphysical Notion of Action and Agency which seems to be generally entertained by the defenders of the forementioned Notions of Liberty, Moral Agency, &c.,	224
III. The Reasons why some think it contrary to Common Sense, to suppose Things which are necessary, to be worthy of either Praise or Blame,	232
IV. It is agreeable to Common Sense, and the natural Notions of Mankind, to suppose moral Necessity to be consistent with Praise and Blame, Reward and Punishment,	239
V. Concerning those Objections, that this Scheme of Necessity renders all Means and Endeavours for the avoiding of Sin, or the obtaining Virtue and Holiness, vain and to no purpose; and that it makes Men no more than mere Machines in affairs of Morality and Religion,	240
VI. Concerning that Objection against the Doctrine which has been maintained, that it agrees with	

SECTION.	PAGE.
the Stoical Doctrine of Fate, and the Opinion of Mr Hobbes,	257
VII. Concerning the Necessity of the Divine Will,	260
VIII. Some further Objection against the Moral Necessity of God's Volition considered,	270
IX. Concerning that Objection against the Doctrine which has been maintained, that it makes God the Author of Sin,	285
X. Concerning Sin's first Entrance into the World,	303
XI. Of a Supposed Inconsistence of these Principles with God's moral Character,	305
XII. Of a supposed Tendency of these Principles to Atheism and Licentiousness,	311
XIII. Concerning that Objection against the Reasoning by which the Calvinistic Doctrine is supported, that it is metaphysical and abstruse,	314
CONCLUSION,	322

I N Q U I R Y ,

ETC. ETC.

PART I.

WHEREIN ARE EXPLAINED AND STATED VARIOUS TERMS AND THINGS BELONGING TO THE SUBJECT OF THE ENSUING DISCOURSE.

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 the 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 plainly, *that by which the mind chooses any thing*. The faculty of the *will* is that faculty or 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*.

If any think it is a more perfect definition of the will to say, that, It is that by which the soul either *chooses* or *refuses*, I am content with it; though I think that it

is enough to say, It is that by which the soul chooses: for in every act of will whatsoever, the mind chooses one thing rather than another; it chooses something rather than the contrary, or rather than the want or non-existence of that thing. So, in every act of refusal, the mind chooses the absence of the thing refused; the positive and the negative are set before the mind for its choice, and it chooses the negative; and the mind's making its choice in that case is properly the act of the will; the will's determining between the two is a voluntary determining, but that is the same thing as making a choice. So that whatever names we call the act of the will by, *choosing, refusing, approving, disapproving, liking, disliking, embracing, rejecting, determining, directing, commanding, forbidding, inclining*, or being *averse, a being pleased or displeased with*; all may be reduced to this of *choosing*. For the soul to act *voluntarily*, is evermore to act *electively*.

Mr Locke* says, "The will signifies nothing but a power or ability to *prefer* or *choose*;" and in the foregoing page says, "The word *preferring* seems best to express the act of volition;" but adds, that "it does it not precisely; for (says he) though a man would prefer flying to walking, yet who can say he ever wills it?" But the instance he mentions does not prove that there is any thing else in *willing* but merely *preferring*; for it should be considered what is the next and immediate object of the will, with respect to a man's walking, or any other external action; which is, not being removed from one place to another, on the earth or through the air—these are remoter objects of preference—but such or such an immediate exertion of himself. The thing nextly chosen or preferred when a man wills to walk, is, not his being removed to such a place where he would be, but such an exertion and motion of his legs and feet, &c., in order to it. And his willing such an alteration in his body in the present moment, is nothing else but his choosing or preferring such an alteration in

* Human Understanding. Edit. 7, vol. i. p. 197.

his body at such a moment, or his liking it better than the forbearance of it. And God has so made and established the human nature, the soul being united to a body in proper state, that the soul preferring or choosing such an immediate exertion or alteration of the body, such an alteration instantaneously follows. There is nothing else in the actions of my mind, that I am conscious of while I walk, but only my preferring or choosing, through successive moments, that there should be such alterations of my external sensations and motions, together with a concurring habitual expectation that it will be so; having ever found by experience, that on such an immediate preference, such sensations and motions do actually, instantaneously, and constantly arise. But it is not so in the case of flying; though a man may be said remotely to choose or prefer flying, yet he does not choose or prefer, incline to, or desire, under circumstances in view, any immediate exertion of the members of his body in order to it, because he has no expectation that he should obtain the desired end by any such exertion; and he does not prefer or incline to any bodily exertion or effort under this apprehended circumstance, of its being wholly in vain. So that if we carefully distinguish the proper objects of the several acts of the will, it will not appear, by this and such like instances, that there is any difference between *volition* and *preference*; or that a man's choosing, liking best, or being best pleased with a thing, are not the same with his willing that thing; as they seem to be according to those general and more natural motions of men, according to which language is formed. Thus, an act of the will is commonly expressed by *its pleasing a man* to do thus or thus; and a man doing as he *wills*, and doing as he *pleases*, are the same thing in common speech.

Mr Locke* says, "The will is perfectly distinguished from desire, which in the very same action may have a quite contrary tendency from that which our wills set us upon. A man (says he,) whom I cannot deny, may

* Human Understanding, vol. i. pp. 203, 204.

oblige me to use persuasions to another, which, at the same time I am speaking, I may wish may not prevail on him. In this case, it is plain the will and desire run counter." I do not suppose that *will* and *desire* are words of precisely the same signification: *will* seems to be a word of a more general signification, extending to things present and absent. *Desire* respects something absent. I may prefer my present situation and posture, suppose sitting still, or having my eyes open, and so may will it. But yet I cannot think they are so entirely distinct, that they can ever be properly said to run counter. A man never, in any instance, wills any thing contrary to his desires, or desires any thing contrary to his will. The forementioned instance, which Mr Locke produces, does not prove that he ever does. He may, on some consideration or other, will to utter speeches which have a tendency to persuade another, and still may desire that they may not persuade him; but yet his will and desire do not run counter at all; the thing which he wills, the very same he desires; and he does not will a thing, and desire the contrary, in any particular. In this instance, it is not carefully observed what is the thing willed, and what is the thing desired: if it were, it would be found that will and desire do not clash in the least. The thing willed on some consideration, is to utter such words; and certainly, the same consideration so influences him, that he does not desire the contrary; all things considered, he chooses to utter such words, and does not desire not to utter them. And so as to the thing which Mr Locke speaks of as desired, viz. that the words, though they tend to persuade, should not be effectual to that end; his will is not contrary to this; he does not will that they should be effectual, but rather wills that they should not, as he desires. In order to prove that the will and desire may run counter, it should be shown that they may be contrary one to the other in the same thing, or with respect to the very same object of will or desire: but here the objects are two; and in each, taken by themselves, the will and desire agree.

And it is no wonder that they should not agree in different things, however little distinguished they are in their nature. The will may not agree with the will, nor desire agree with desire, in different things. As in this very instance which Mr Locke mentions, a person may, on some consideration, desire to use persuasions, and at the same time may desire they may not prevail; but yet nobody will say, that *desire* runs counter to *desire*, or that this proves that *desire* is perfectly a distinct thing from *desire*. The like might be observed of the other instance Mr Locke produces, of a man's desiring to be eased of pain, &c.

But not to dwell any longer on this, whether *desire* and *will*, and whether *preference* and *volition*, be precisely the same things or no; yet, I trust it will be allowed by all, that in every act of will there is an act of choice; that in every volition there is a preference, or a prevailing inclination of the soul, whereby the soul, at that instant, is out of a state of perfect indifference, with respect to the direct object of the volition. So that in every act, or going forth of the will, there is some preponderation of the mind or inclination one way rather than another; and the soul had rather *have* or *do* one thing than another, or than not to have or do that thing; and that there, where there is absolutely no preferring or choosing, but a perfect continuing equilibrium, there is no volition.

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 mo-