

# Jonathan Edwards on the Freedom and the Will

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These are the visuals for a talk delivered at the University of Michigan, Nov. 20, 2012.

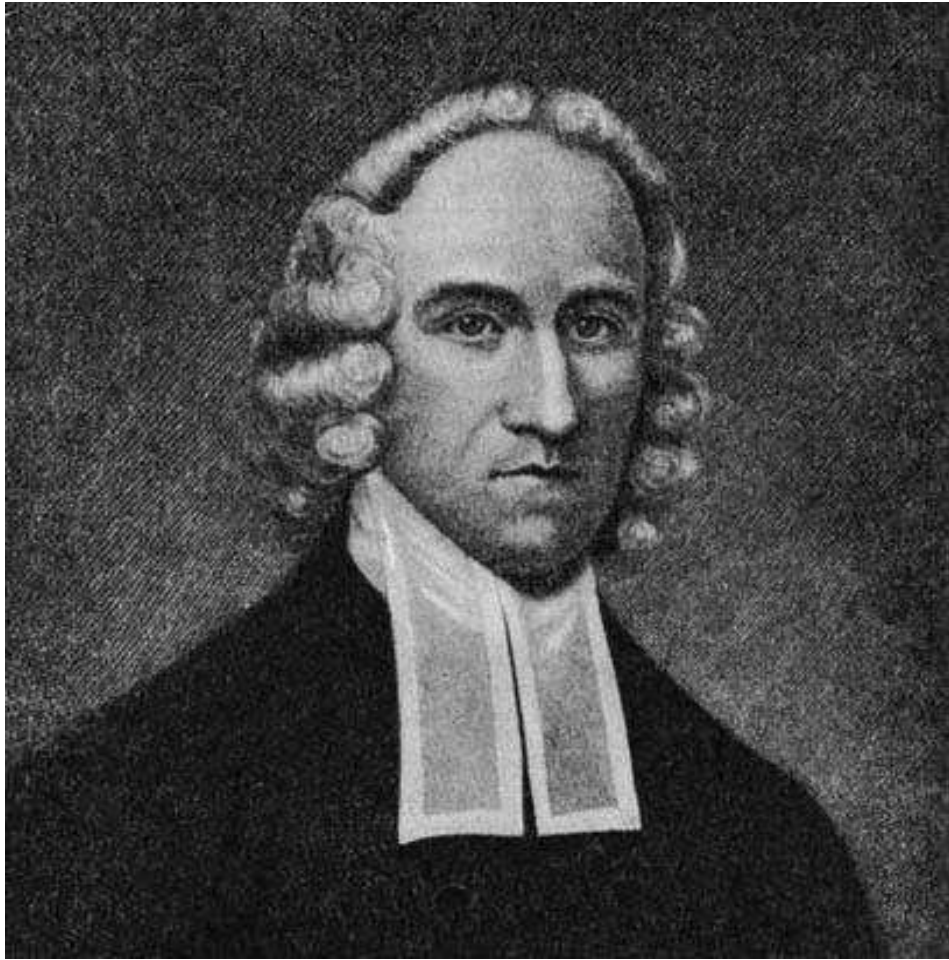
*Abstract:*

This will be a historical talk.

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) was the leading American intellectual of his day, and I'd rank him among the very best American philosophers ever. His work has been neglected by philosophers, and even by theologians; I'll try to convey a sense in this talk of why that's unfortunate.

The talk will concentrate on Edwards' essay on the freedom of the will, which, following the contemporary fashion for wordy titles, is called "An Inquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of the Freedom of the Will which is Supposed to be Essential to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame." This book was published in 1754.

I'll neglect the theological parts of the work and concentrate on the philosophy. I'll try to give an impression of Edwards' philosophical psychology, of his arguments for determinism and against the libertarians, and of his uncompromising version of compatibilism.



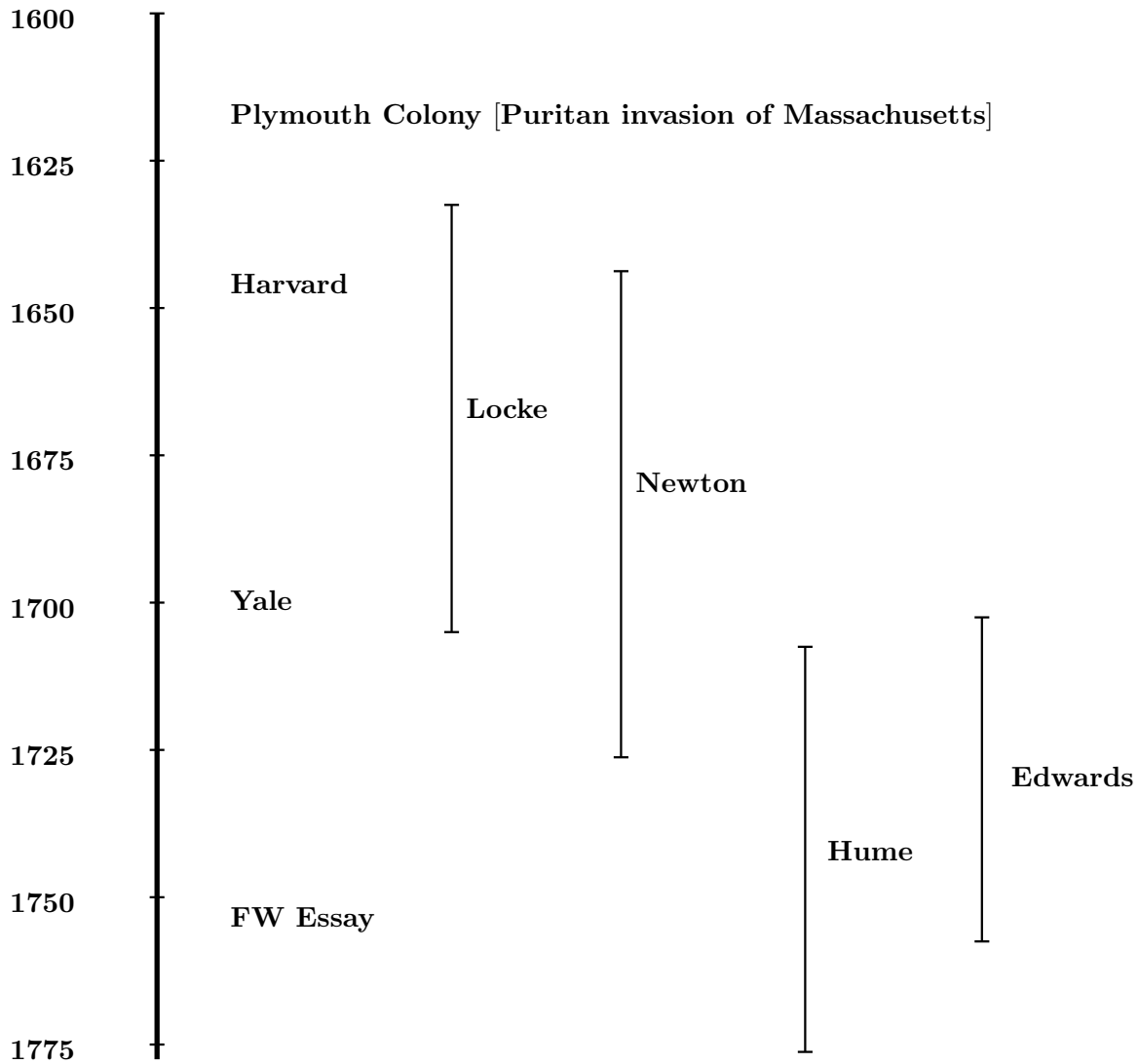
Jonathan Edwards, 1703–1758

## General Outline

- Who was Jonathan Edwards?
- Background on the *Essay on the Freedom of the Will*.
- Philosophical psychology.
- Arguments for determinism.
- Edwards and the libertarians.
- Edwards' compatibilism.

**Who was Edwards?**

# A Timeline



## Some Other Characters, Dates

- St. Augustine of Hippo, 354–430
- John Calvin, 1509–1564
- Jacobus Armenius, 1560–1609
- Daniel Whitby, 1638–1726
- Thomas Chubb, 1679–1747
- Isaac Watts, 1674–1748

## Edwards' Career

- Born in 1703, East Windsor, Connecticut.
- Graduated from Yale in 1720; Masters degree from Yale in 1723.
- Pastor in Northampton, Massachusetts, 1727–1750
- Missionary to the Housatonnuck Indians in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, 1751–1757
- Published *Essay on Freedom*, 1754
- President of Princeton early 1758.
- Died in 1758.

# Work

- Sermons
- Works on theology
- Scientific work
- Natural history (e.g., a work on the flight of spiders)
- Physics (e.g., work in optics)
- Philosophy



# Background on the 1754 Essay

# Theological Determinism

- St. Augustine, *Dialogues on the Freedom of the Will*
- John Calvin
- Puritan theology

# Libertarian Reactions to Calvinism in Holland and England

- **Jacobus Arminius**
- **Daniel Whitby**
- **Isaac Watts**
- **Thomas Chubb**
- **Samuel Clarke**

## Jacobus Arminius (Jakob Hermanszoon), 1560–1609

- Dutch theologian, tried to moderate some of Calvin's more extreme doctrines.
- A principal issue was “unconditional election”.
- Later objectors to Calvinism went further, but were lumped together under the heading “Arminians.”
- Edwards doesn't debate Arminius explicitly. The chief opponents he takes on are Daniel Whitby, Thomas Chubb, and Isaac Watts.
- Although Samuel Clarke was perhaps the best known libertarian philosopher of the time, for some reason, Edwards mentions him only a few times.

## Daniel Whitby, 1638–1726

- Church of England minister.
- Anti-Calvinist theologian.
- *Discourse on the five points* [of Calvinism], 1710.
- Argued that introducing absolute necessity into human action would destroy all religion and morality: if we have to choose between God's foreknowledge and free will, choose the latter.

## Isaac Watts, 1674–1748

- A leading English nonconformist and preacher.
- Now mainly known as a composer of hymns. (“Joy to the world.”)
- Wrote a widely used book on logic, also wrote in philosophy and theology.
- He wanted to moderate Calvinist doctrines about freedom.
- Watts wanted to say that the mind is not causal in the way that nature is, and that this would leave room for human freedom.

## Thomas Chubb, 1679–1747

- A chandler's assistant, glove maker, and amateur theologian.
- Defended Arianism, developed a version of deism.
- Views on freedom were published in *A Collection of Tracts on Various Subjects*, 1730.

## Slow Progress?

- Setting aside some technical details (such as how the logic of counterfactuals bears on the formulation of free will), and just looking at the pattern of philosophical positions in the free will debate in the 17th century, ...
- It looks pretty similar to what you find at present.



Edwards'

1754 *Essay on the Freedom of the Will*

# The Four Parts of the Essay

## I. Important concepts.

- Mechanical picture of the will
- Necessity
- Liberty

## II. Demolish Arminian Freedom.

## III. Consistency of determinism with moral agency, praise/blame.

## IV. Arminian reasoning reconsidered.

[How could anyone be so stupid?]

**Part I:**  
**Explanation of Terms**

## What the Will Is

- The will is that by which the mind chooses anything.
- Choice is preference.
- Locke hedges on this equivalence, saying “for though a man may prefer flying to walking, who wills it?”  
But the *immediate* object of the will is bodily movement. And here, to will is to prefer.
- God has made human nature so that when the soul prefers or chooses an immediate exertion, it instantaneously occurs.
- What about Locke’s example of someone who is persuaded, say by a command, to do something he would rather not do? ‘Desire’ is a more general term, referring to remote or absent things. But you *never* will anything contrary to what you desire. Someone who does something “against his will” wills the thing he does, and this is what he desires to do.

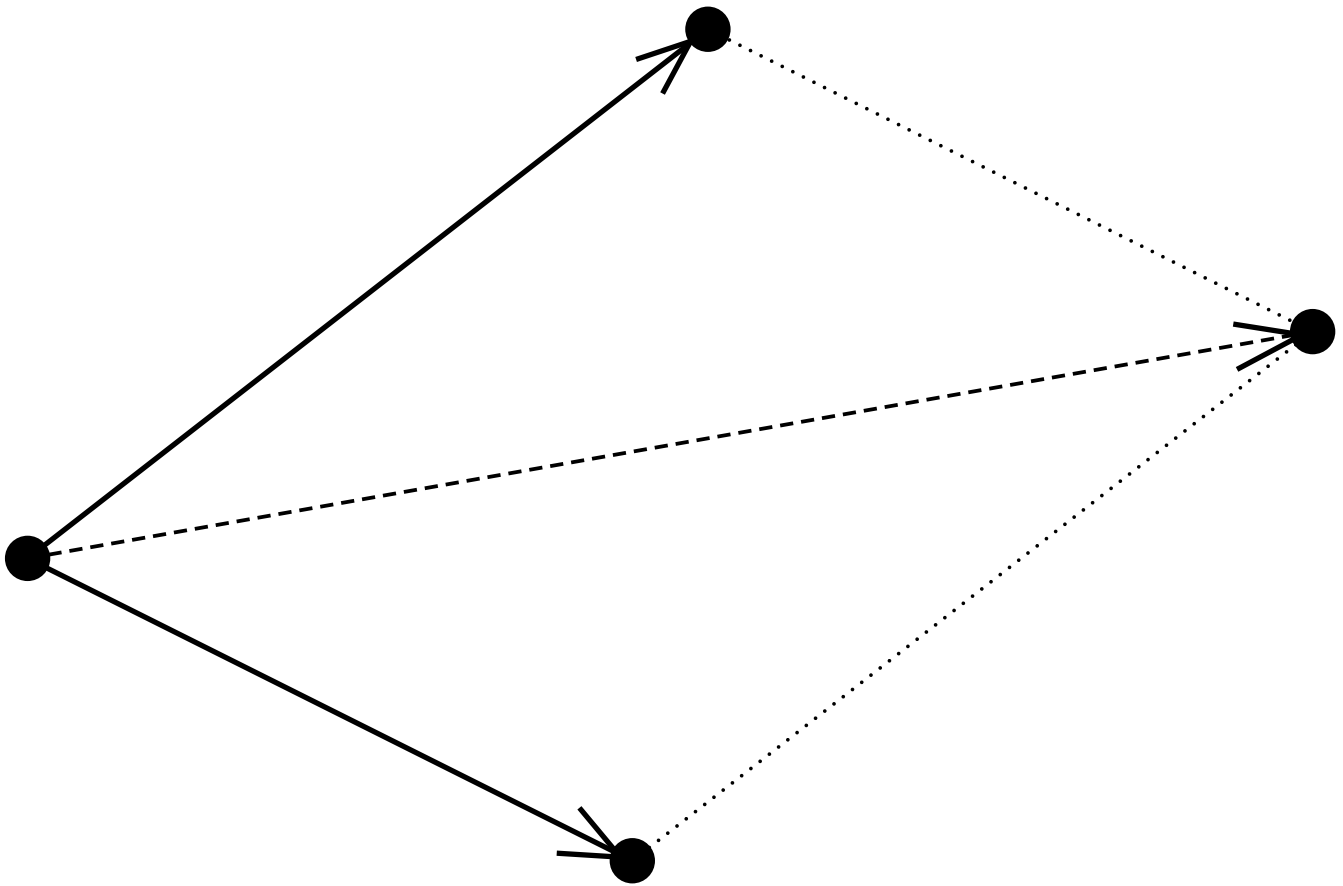
## Determination of the Will

- What determines (or causes) the will is *the motive that as it stands in the view of the mind is the strongest.*
- The motive is the whole of what moves the mind to volition.
- The motive can be a whole, with parts; its strength is the combined strength of its parts.
- So the will is moved according to the greatest direct and immediate apparent good.

## Volition as a Mechanism

- The idea is that the will is a mechanism that outputs actions, ...
- And that operates by determining what is most preferred when the choice is made.
- Edwards seems to think of this as a simple mechanism rather than as a process of reasoning—say a calculation involving utilities.
- I'm strongly reminded here of the rule for resolution of forces in Newtonian statics. Forces act on a point mass in different directions.
- These forces are quantified, and are represented as vectors. The angle of a vector stands for the direction of the force; its length stands for the magnitude of the force.
- The vectors are resolved into a resultant force using the *parallelogram rule*.

# Parallelogram Rule



## Balancing as a Reflective Decision Procedure

... divide a sheet of paper by a line into two Columns: writing over the one Pro, and over the other Con. Then ... I put down under the different heads short Hints of the different Motives ...

When I have thus got them all together into one View, I endeavor to find their respective Weights; and where I find two, one on each side, that seem equal, I strike them both out: If I find a Reason pro equal to some two Reasons con, I strike out the three. ...

and thus proceeding I find at length where the balance lies; and if after a Day or two of farther Consideration nothing new that is of Importance occurs on either side, I come to a Determination accordingly.

—*Benjamin Franklin, letter to Joseph Priestly, 1772*



## Necessity, Possibility, Inability, Etc.

- In common speech, “necessity” is relative to a vain opposition to some hindrance, so that an endeavor is frustrated: something we can’t help, do what we will.
- When terms like ‘necessary’ are used in cases where no opposition to a desired end is supposed, they don’t have their proper significance, and are nonsensical. So it’s nonsense to say that it’s necessary for someone to choose virtue or vice when this is what he prefers.
- There is a metaphysical sense of “necessity” that is quite diverse from the common usage. Metaphysical necessity is certainty, and has to do with a *full and fixed connection between subject and predicate*. This connection can be logical, or temporal (past/present vs. future), or causal.

- ‘Contingency’ is commonly used when the connection with a thing’s causes and antecedents isn’t discerned.
- But it’s also used (by philosophers) for something absolutely without ground or reason.

## Moral and Natural Necessity

- ‘Moral necessity’ can be used for moral obligation, or for practical certainty, or high probability.
- Sometimes it can mean necessity arising from moral causes or strength of motives. This is JE’s preferred sense.
- Natural necessity has to do with natural causes; e.g., an unsupported object falls through natural necessity.
- Moral necessity can be as absolute as natural necessity. And here’s an argument for this ...

## A Quote

That is, the effect may be as perfectly connected with its moral cause, as a naturally necessary effect is with its natural cause. Whether the will in every case is necessarily determined by the strongest motive, ... I suppose none will deny but that, in some cases, a previous bias or inclination, or the motive presented, may be so powerful, that the act of the will may be indissolubly connected therewith.

[Examples where an inclination is increasingly difficult to overcome ]

... whatever power men may be supposed to have to surmount difficulties, yet that power is not infinite.

- So there is such a thing as moral inability.
- Some examples:
  - (1) A woman of great honor and chastity may have a moral inability to prostitute herself to her slave.
  - (2) A child of great love and duty to his parents may be unable to be willing to kill his father.
  - (3) A drunkard, under such and such circumstances, may be unable to forbear taking of strong drink
  - (4) A very malicious man may be unable to exert benevolent acts to an enemy, or to desire his prosperity

## Ifs and Cans

- As JE uses ‘moral inability’, then, it signifies an impossibility of willing something (because, for instance, of a strong habit to do the opposite), in cases where an inclination to do that thing is supposable.
- In ordinary use, you can’t say that a malicious man, for instance, couldn’t withhold his hand from striking, or a drunkard couldn’t keep the cup from his mouth.
- Commonly, we say the drunkard could refrain from drinking because he would refrain *if he willed to do so*.
- And of course it would be a contradiction to say he couldn’t will to refrain, if he did so will.
- Ordinarily, ‘inability’ refers to an obstacle preventing the performance of something that is supposed to be willed. But in the case, for instance, of the drunkard, nothing is wanting but a will.

# Liberty

- In common usage, it is simply the power to do as you please.
- There is a philosophical usage that Edwards will proceed to attack.
- Components of Arminian liberty:
  1. *Self-determining power* of the will, enabling choices to be made undetermined by causes or anything prior.
  2. *Indifference* before choice, with the mind in equilibrium.
  3. *Contingency* of a philosophical sort—no fixed, certain connection with any previous ground.

**Part II:**  
**Whether There Is, or Can Be,**  
**Such a Thing as Arminian Freedom of**  
**the Will**



## Rough Pass at A Regress

- Suppose that when the Arminians speak of the will determining itself they mean that the soul determines its own act of will. (Otherwise the term would make no sense; faculties don't determine faculties.)
- So, in choosing its acts, the soul determines all free acts of the will.
- But acts of choice are subject to and follow other acts of choice.
- Therefore behind any act of choice there stands another.
- This is a contradiction, because nowhere in the chain will there be an act of choice that is not determined by a previous act.

## Ways of Evading the Regress Considered

- If the regress stops, it must stop in an act of choice, and to be free, this choice must be an act of the soul.
- But if this is an act of the soul, it must be chosen, and this choice itself will be an act of the soul, contrary to assumption.
- It would be a contradiction to say the soul determines its volition, but not by an act. To direct, decide, or determine anything is an act.
- To say the will determines itself is to say it does so by an act.
- To say that the act itself determines itself is a contradiction; cause is distinct from effect.
- If, however, the act comes about without any cause, of itself, then nothing determines the will. There is “a great noise about self-determination ... but [the acts] arise from nothing; no cause, no power, no influence being at all concerned in the matter.”

## In fact ...

- The real question is whether anything can come to pass without a cause.

# Universal Causality

- Baldly assert the thesis: Nothing comes about without a cause.
- This is a first dictate of common sense.
- Without inference to causes, we would have no knowledge of God, ...
- or of things beyond immediate ideas.

## Whether Volition Can Arise without a Cause through the Activity of the Soul

- [Here JE is criticizing Watts, who denies universal causality for incorporeal things.]
- The question has to be, of a particular act of volition, “Why does the spirit act this way rather than another?”
- If the soul is in the same circumstances, it will make the same choice, so there must be a cause which is the same in both cases.
- If all acts of the soul were free volitions, then choices wouldn’t be produced by the soul—that is, these “free” acts wouldn’t be chosen by the soul.

## Even if the Evasions Were True, They Wouldn't Help the Arminian Cause

- The arguments against the Arminian position are simple:
  - If they hold that every act of free will is determined by the soul's free choice, then there is a contradiction of regress.
  - If it is determined by some *other* act of the soul, this destroys the idea of *self-* determination.

## The Will's Determining in Things That Are Perfectly Indifferent in the View of the Mind

- It's common to argue that we have an experience of determining our wills with no prevailing motive. (E.g., Watts does this, adding the idea that the agreeability of what is chosen arises from the choice.)
- But it's inconsistent to claim that the will chooses, yet is indifferent *when* it chooses. Choice *is* preference, the mind can only determine itself by preferring.

## The Example of the Chess Board

- Suppose a man decides to touch a square of a chess board.
- Nothing in any square recommends itself as worthy of choice.
- How is such a choice possible, then?



## Determining to Choose by Accident

- For instance, you can simply choose the square that your eye happens to be on.
- Such a determination involves three things:
  1. A *general* decision to touch some square or other.
  2. A *general* decision to give up to accident, in some way.
  3. A particular desire to touch the square that is selected by accident.

## You Might Ask ...

- Is Edwards himself subject to a regress here?
- He is, I believe, if the accidental property itself has to be chosen, by virtue of being preferred over other accidental features that could be used.
- There is no regress if humans (and donkeys) have some built-in mechanism that inputs a set and outputs a member of the set. Perhaps the attentional and perceptual systems do this.
- This is very like the familiar regress of mental “homunculi” in philosophy of cognition; conscious, rational processes have to be grounded in automatic mental mechanisms, if a regress of cognitive acts is to be avoided.

## The Supposed Liberty of the Will, As Opposite to All Necessity

- It has already been shown that everything has a cause.
- If there were, contrary to what we have shown, contingent volitions, without an infallible connection to anything going before, there would be no reason for them to occur at any particular time or to have any determinate qualities that might occur to you.

[Spontaneity, if it existed, would have to be entirely unpredictable.]

## Religious Arguments

- If God didn't know the decisions that would be made by moral agents,
  - (1) His plan for the world would be fallible.
  - (2) Prophecies in scripture would have been impossible.
- But God's certain foreknowledge of future events is incompatible with the claim that volitional events can be contingent.

## Religious Arguments Aside

- You could equally well argue that knowledge of the future, ...
- including those parts of the future that depend on human decisions,
- would be impossible if these decisions were contingent.
- Take any such claim: I will choose at some point before 7:00 to end this talk.
- Suppose my choice is contingent.
- Then there's a possible future along which I don't make this decision, and along this future it would be true to say no one knew now I would make this decision.
- But if it could be true in the future that you don't know now that I'll decide to stop by 7:00, it must be true now that you don't know this.

A Recapitulation:

Whether We Suppose the Volitions of Moral  
Agents to be Connected with Anything  
Antecedent,

Yet They Must be Necessary in Such a Way  
as to overthrow Arminian Liberty

- Every act of will has a cause or not.
- Causes necessitate, even if the cause is a motive and the effect a volition.
- But if an act of will is uncaused, then no act of will, no prior mental act or state, has any part in it. So these events would not be acts in any sense—they would simply happen to us—and would happen randomly.
- “There is no privilege, no dignity, in freedom to act at random.”

## Part III:

Wherein Is Inquired, Whether any such  
Liberty of Will as the Arminians Hold,  
Be Necessary to Moral Agency, Virtue  
and Vice, Praise, and Dispraise, Etc.



## Religious Arguments

- E.g., God's moral excellence is necessary, but God is praiseworthy

...

## Command and Obligation to Obedience Is Consistent with Moral Inability to Obey

- [Here you see a tough-minded Calvinist at work.]
- It is not at all absurd for God to command what men are unable to do.
- In fact:
  - (1) The will itself—not just consequent actions—can be the proper object of a command.
  - (2) But the *opposition* of will to a command implies that there may be moral inability to obey in some cases.
  - (3) So things may be commanded that men are unable to do. (I.e., morally unable.)

## Three Observations

- (1) If people are to be justly excused on account of their faculties this must be because of want of understanding. E.g., you can't justly blame someone for not being grateful to an unknown benefactor.
- (2) Weakness of body is natural inability.
- (3) All such inability may be resolved into lack of natural capacity or strength.

## Sincerity of Desire to do Well is No Excuse

- If a desire doesn't result in a volition, it is remote and weak.
- For instance, a drunkard may desire the virtue of temperance, but goes on with his drinking.
- This is no substitute for genuinely willing to be temperate.
- Only when "sincere" desire means genuine intention is there a legitimate excuse.

## Liberty of Indifference is Not Only Unnecessary to Virtue, It's *Inconsistent* with It

- The virtuous heart should not be indifferent about virtuous actions. It should *love* them.
- And it's common sense that indifference is often vicious.
- Every fixed bias in the mind brings with it a moral inability to act contrary to it.
- So if moral inability were an excuse, a person with a fixed bias to do evil, would be less blameworthy than one without this strong bias.
- So on Arminian principles there can be no virtue and vice. No propensity or habit could be virtuous or vicious because insofar as a habit is fixed it would destroy freedom.

## Recapitulate

- Motives induce acts of will—the inducement is proportional to the strength of the motive.
- And as the inducement grows stronger, the greater the moral inability will be of a man to do the opposite.
- So if moral inability is an excuse, those most motivated to commit crimes will be most excused.

## Part IV:

Wherein the Chief Grounds of the Reasonings of Arminians in Support and Defence of the Forementioned Notions of Liberty, Moral Agency, etc. and Against the Opposite Doctrine, Are Considered

## I Won't Discuss Part IV

- Except to say that the forcefulness of Edwards' arguments and of his rhetoric has produced a secondary problem, ...
- which he tries to address in this last part.
- (The problem is this: if the views he is attacking are so very absurd, how can you account for the existence of his opponents?)



## Well ...

- I've tried to present Edwards' ideas, and some of the more interesting arguments, ...
- but much of that was in my own words.
- So to appreciate the beauty of the rhetoric,
- and the lucidity of the exposition, ...
- you'd have to read him yourself.
- I do recommend this, not only for the ideas, but for a model of how to do philosophy.

## Readings

- [1] Wallace E. Anderson. Editor's introduction. In Wallace E. Anderson, editor, *Jonathan Edwards: Scientific and Philosophical Writings*, pages 1–143. Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut, 1980.
- [2] Paul Ramsey. Editor's introduction. In Paul Ramsey, editor, *Jonathan Edwards: Freedom of the Will*, pages 1–167. Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut, 1957.
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- [4] William Wainwright. Jonathan Edwards. In Edward N. Zalta, editor, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 2008.  
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