

A STUDY EDITION

Freedom of the Will

*A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Prevailing Notions of
the Freedom of Will Supposed to be Essential to Moral Agency,
Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame*

JONATHAN EDWARDS

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Section-by-section summaries in modern English
with selected quotations from the original text

Editor's Note

This is a study edition of Jonathan Edwards's classic treatise, first published in 1754 and long in the public domain. It is designed for teaching and reference rather than as a replacement for the full original text.

The work is organized exactly as Edwards arranged it — a Preface, four Parts, and a Conclusion — with every one of his numbered sections preserved under its original title. For each section you will find a faithful summary of Edwards's argument, rendered in clear modern English while preserving his tone, intent, and theological precision, followed by selected key quotations drawn directly from the original text and set in blockquotes.

Archaic eighteenth-century spellings and constructions have been gently modernized in the summaries (for example, “connexion” becomes “connection”), and Edwards's characteristically long sentences have been untangled for readability. The quotations, by contrast, retain his original wording so that his voice comes through unaltered.

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Preface

Edwards opens by addressing a complaint: many people object to labeling professing Christians with the names of theologians they resemble—"Arminians" after Arminius, "Arians" after Arius, "Socinians" after Socinus—much as followers of Christ are called "Christians." Critics argue this practice unfairly implies these people simply defer to a human authority rather than studying Scripture for themselves, exaggerates real differences between groups, and stems from an uncharitable, party-spirited habit of mind that stigmatizes those who disagree and breeds lasting division among Christians who should otherwise be united in love.

Edwards concedes there is some truth to this: people's flawed dispositions often misuse such labels, and needless bitterness toward those who differ in opinion is common. But he thinks the objection is overstated. Naming groups by a shared distinguishing opinion is not inherently born of malice—it is simply how language works. Whenever we need to refer often to a particular group united by some recognizable trait, a single name is more efficient than a clumsy descriptive phrase every time, just as we say "French" and "Spaniards" rather than laboriously describing each nationality anew. Since Calvinists and Arminians frequently need to discuss each other's opinions, using distinct names is a practical necessity, not proof of bad character.

Edwards admits he initially intended to avoid the term "Arminian" in this treatise but found it impractical, since the alternative circumlocutions were even more cumbersome. He insists he uses the term with no intention to demean anyone, and that he would be equally content to be called a "Calvinist," while explicitly disclaiming any personal dependence on Calvin's authority—he holds his views because he believes them true, not because Calvin taught them. He clarifies that not everyone he calls "Arminian" holds every objectionable idea some Arminians hold, and vice versa; in particular, he takes care to note that the author of an anonymous "Essay on the Freedom of the Will" is not to be personally branded, even though Edwards will criticize that Essay's doctrine.

He closes by asking for the reader's calm, patient attention, stressing that the subject—free will—is of supreme importance, since true religion depends on rightly understanding both God and ourselves, and self-knowledge centers above all on rightly understanding the will, the faculty in which virtue and religion chiefly reside.

"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."

"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."

"The knowledge of God, and the knowledge of ourselves, are the most important... and the grand question about the freedom of the will, is the main point that belongs to the science of the will."

Part I: Wherein Are Explained and Stated Various Terms and Things Belonging to the Subject of the Ensuing Discourse

Sect. I. Concerning the Nature of the Will

SUMMARY

Edwards begins by defining his central term. Despite the objections of philosophers who have muddled the concept, he insists the will is, quite simply, "that by which the mind chooses anything." An act of will is nothing other than an act of choosing. He is willing to describe it as that by which the soul "chooses or refuses," but argues even refusal is a form of choosing: to refuse something is to choose its absence. Whatever name we give to an act of will—choosing, liking, approving, being pleased, inclining, commanding—all of these ultimately reduce to the single underlying reality of choice. To act voluntarily is always, in Edwards's phrase, "to act electively."

He then engages John Locke, who had distinguished "willing" from mere "preferring," using the example that a man might prefer to fly rather than walk, yet cannot be said to "will" flying. Edwards rejects this distinction. He argues Locke has mistaken the object of the will: the immediate object of willing to walk is not the distant goal of arriving somewhere, but the immediate bodily exertion itself. A person does not truly prefer or will the act of flying because he has no expectation that willing it could accomplish anything—there is no immediate act available to choose. Once the true, immediate object of volition is correctly identified, "willing" and "preferring" turn out to be the same thing, and ordinary language confirms this: doing what one wills and doing what one pleases are treated as identical in common speech.

Edwards similarly disputes Locke's claim that will and desire can "run counter" to each other, using Locke's own example of a man who uses persuasive words hoping they will not actually persuade. Edwards argues that once we distinguish the true objects of the will and of the desire in such cases, they never actually conflict—the man wills to speak the words, and desires that very same act; his desire not to persuade concerns a separate, remote object, not the same one his will is fixed upon. Two different desires, or a desire and a will pointed at different objects, may fail to align, but this is not the will opposing itself.

Edwards concludes the section by establishing a foundational point he will build on throughout the treatise: every act of will necessarily includes a "preponderation," or preference, of the mind. Where there is no preference at all—only a perfect, unbroken equilibrium—there is simply no volition occurring.

"The will (without any metaphysical refining) is plainly, that by which the mind chooses any thing."

"For the soul to act voluntarily, is evermore to act electively."

"There, where there is absolutely no preferring or choosing, but a perfect continuing equilibrium, there is no volition."

Sect. II. Concerning the Determination of the Will

SUMMARY

Having defined the will, Edwards turns to what determines it—what causes a particular choice to occur rather than another. To speak of the will being "determined" presupposes a cause: something must be the determiner. Edwards states his key thesis plainly: "it is that motive which, as it stands in the view of the mind, is the strongest, that determines the will." By "motive" he means the whole of whatever moves or invites the mind to a volition, whether a single consideration or many combined; whatever wins out in combined strength is, by definition, the strongest motive. Crucially, a motive must be something perceived or apprehended by the understanding—nothing wholly outside the mind's awareness can influence choice.

Edwards then argues that whatever functions as a motive must appear, in some sense, "good" to the person perceiving it—where "good" means simply agreeable or pleasing, not necessarily morally good. It would be absurd, he says, to suppose something could attract the will by appearing repulsive; things move the will only by appearing desirable. Hence: "the will always is as the greatest apparent good is." He carefully qualifies this famous formula in two ways. First, "good" here means "agreeable," including the removal of discomfort, not moral goodness. Second, this refers strictly to the immediate object of a given act of will, not to remoter ends the act may serve—illustrated by the example of a drunkard, whose immediate choice concerns drinking or not drinking now, distinct from his more remote judgments about future pleasure or misery.

He then enumerates factors that make an object appear more or less agreeable: the object's own apparent nature; the degree and nearness in time of anticipated pleasure or pain; the vividness and certainty with which the mind perceives that pleasure or pain; and the particular temperament or state of the perceiving mind itself, shaped by nature, habit, or education. All these factors combine to produce, at any given moment, a single "greatest apparent good," which the will invariably follows. Edwards closes by clarifying that the will does follow "the last dictate of the understanding," but only if "understanding" is taken broadly to include all perception and apprehension—not narrowly as cool rational judgment of what is truly best, which the will does not always obey.

"It is that motive which, as it stands in the view of the mind, is the strongest, that determines the will."

"The will always is as the greatest apparent good is."

"The choice of the mind never departs from that which, at that time... appears most agreeable and pleasing, all things considered."

Sect. III. Concerning the Meaning of the Terms Necessity, Impossibility, Inability, and of Contingence

SUMMARY

Edwards now performs careful conceptual surgery on the vocabulary of the free-will debate. In ordinary speech, he observes, "necessary," "impossible," "irresistible," and "unable" are all relative terms: they presuppose some opposing will, desire, or effort that proves insufficient to prevent an outcome. Something is "necessary" when it happens no matter how much we might wish or try to prevent it. This everyday meaning is deeply embedded in how we learn and use these words from childhood, and it is easy to unconsciously smuggle this "opposed-will" connotation into philosophical arguments where it does not actually apply—creating confusion.

This matters because philosophers and theologians often apply these same words to cases where no opposition of will is even conceivable—such as God's necessarily loving himself, or a person necessarily choosing virtue at the very moment he is willingly choosing it (where there is no contrary will to be overcome, since the choosing just is what is happening). Used this way, the terms carry a different, technical meaning. Edwards defines this philosophical or metaphysical necessity as nothing more than "the full and fixed connection between the things signified by the subject and predicate of a proposition"—that is, a certainty of connection between a subject and what is truly said of it, regardless of whether any opposition is even supposable. This is the sense he will use throughout the treatise.

He identifies three ways such a fixed connection can arise: (1) intrinsically, where denying the connection would be self-contradictory (e.g., mathematical truths, or God's necessary attributes); (2) by virtue of something already having happened—past and present facts become "necessary" simply because they cannot now be otherwise; and (3) by consequence—where something is certainly connected to something else that is necessary in one of the first two ways. Future events, he notes, can only ever be necessary in this third, consequential sense. He also distinguishes "general" necessity (true considering everything) from "particular" necessity (true and fixed with respect to a specific person or moment, whatever the wider picture). Finally, he applies the same analysis to "impossible" (negative necessity) and "contingent"—arguing that in disputes over free will, "contingent" is misused to mean not merely "unforeseen" but "utterly without any prior ground or cause," a usage he will challenge later in the work.

"Philosophical necessity is really nothing else than the full and fixed connexion between the things signified by the subject and predicate of a proposition, which affirms something to be true."

"The common notion of necessity and impossibility implies something that frustrates endeavour or desire."

"[Necessary] terms... are often used by philosophers and metaphysicians in a sense quite diverse from their common use and original signification: for they apply them to many cases in which no opposition is supposed or supposable."

Sect. IV. Of the Distinction of Natural and Moral Necessity and Inability

SUMMARY

Building on his definition of philosophical necessity, Edwards introduces his pivotal distinction between natural and moral necessity. Natural necessity is what results from purely physical causes acting independently of choice—a body falling when unsupported, a person feeling pain when wounded, or

automatically assenting that two and two make four. Moral necessity, by contrast, is the certain connection between an act of will and its moral causes—the strength of a person's inclinations, dispositions, or the motives before their mind. When someone's inclination or motive is strong enough, Edwards argues, the resulting choice can be just as fully and certainly connected to its cause as any physical effect is to its physical cause; the difference lies not in how firm the connection is, but in the kind of cause and effect involved (mental/moral versus physical).

He stresses that "natural" here is simply the traditional word for events that don't obviously involve choice—not because choice is somehow separate from the fabric of nature, but because we historically learned the concept of "nature" from observing the physical world's regularities, where choice plays no visible part. He then explains natural inability (being unable to do something even if one wills it, due to some obstacle in the body, faculties, or external world) versus moral inability, which is not a defect of power at all but consists in the absence of sufficient inclination, or the presence of a stronger contrary inclination or motive.

Edwards gives vivid examples: a woman of great virtue may be morally unable to prostitute herself; a devoted child may be unable to bring himself to kill his father; a habitual drunkard may be unable to refuse drink when tempted; a deeply malicious person may be unable to wish an enemy well. He distinguishes general/habitual moral inability (a settled, standing disposition against certain acts) from particular/occasional moral inability (inability regarding one specific choice due to the strength of present motives). Crucially, he argues that moral inability is not true inability in the proper, natural sense at all: "a man cannot truly be said to be unable to do a thing when he can do it if he will." What such a person lacks is not power but willingness—the faculties and capacity are fully present; only the disposition is missing. This sets up his later argument that moral inability, however real and however strong, is compatible with genuine moral responsibility.

"Moral inability consists... in the opposition or want of inclination."

"A man cannot truly be said to be unable to do a thing when he can do it if he will."

"There are faculties of the mind, and capacity of nature, and every thing else sufficient, but a disposition: nothing is wanting but a will."

Sect. V. Concerning the Notion of Liberty and of Moral Agency

SUMMARY

Edwards now defines liberty itself. In ordinary usage, "liberty" means simply the power or opportunity a person has to act as he pleases—freedom from hindrance in carrying out his own will. Its opposites are constraint (being forced to act against one's will) and restraint (being prevented from acting according to one's will). Crucially, Edwards observes that liberty, properly speaking, is a property of a person or agent who possesses a will—not a property of the will itself. It is nonsensical, he argues, to ask whether "the will" is free, just as it would be nonsensical to ask whether a bird's power of flying itself has the power to fly; rather, the bird (the agent) has the liberty to fly. Under this common, plain meaning, liberty says

nothing whatsoever about how a person's choice came to be—whether caused by external motives, internal habits, prior causes, or no cause at all. However a person comes to will something, he is free, in the ordinary sense, so long as nothing stops him from doing what he has willed.

Edwards then contrasts this common notion with how Arminians, Pelagians, and others define liberty. Their notion requires three additional things: (1) a "self-determining power" in the will itself, independent of any prior cause; (2) that the will, prior to choosing, exist in a state of "indifference" or equilibrium; and (3) "contingence," meaning the choice has no fixed, necessary connection to any prior ground or reason at all. For them, without this special kind of uncaused, self-originating freedom, there is no real liberty—regardless of whether a person can otherwise act as he pleases. Edwards is setting up his central target: he will argue in the rest of the treatise that this Arminian notion of liberty is incoherent and impossible, while his own, ordinary notion of liberty is fully compatible with a will that is morally necessitated by antecedent causes.

Finally, he defines moral agency: a moral agent is a being capable of actions that carry moral quality—that can properly be called virtuous or vicious, praiseworthy or blameworthy. This requires a moral sense of good and evil, and a capacity to be moved by moral motives presented to the understanding. The sun and fire, however beneficial or destructive, are not moral agents, since their effects are not guided by understanding or choice; nor, in Edwards's view, are animals, which act from instinct rather than reasoned choice, and lack any sense of desert. He notes that God himself is the supreme moral agent—perfectly and necessarily holy—even though, as sovereign ruler over all, he cannot be subject to law, reward, or punishment as human moral agents are. This capacity for moral agency, Edwards notes, is central to what Scripture calls the "image of God" in man.

"The plain and obvious meaning of the words freedom and liberty, in common speech, is power, opportunity, or advantage, that any one has to do as he pleases."

"To talk of liberty, or the contrary, as belonging to the very will itself, is not to speak good sense... For the will itself is not an agent that has a will; the power of choosing itself has not a power of choosing."

"[Arminian liberty consists in] a self-determining power in the will... Indifference belongs to liberty, in their notion of it... Contingence is another thing that belongs and is essential to it... as opposed to all necessity."

Part II. 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

Having spent Part I clarifying terms, Edwards turns in Part II to the heart of the controversy: does the Arminian conception of a free, self-determining will even make coherent sense? He examines it from every angle — as self-causing power, as arising from nothing, as rooted in indifference, as opposed to necessity — and argues that in each case the notion collapses into contradiction.

Sect. I. Showing the Manifest Inconsistence of the Arminian Notion of Liberty of Will Consisting in the Will's Self-Determining Power

SUMMARY

Edwards opens his central argument by attacking the Arminian claim that the will is "free" because it determines itself — that is, the will's own acts are caused by the will's own prior acts of choosing. He first clarifies what this must mean: to say "the will determines itself" can only sensibly mean that the soul, in willing, determines its own volitions. But this immediately generates an infinite regress. If every free act of will must be determined by a preceding act of will (choosing that act), then that preceding act must itself have been freely chosen by a still earlier act, and so on. Either this chain has no beginning — which is absurd, since the soul itself began to exist — or it terminates in a first act of will that is not determined by any prior act of will. But if that first act is not self-determined, it is not "free" by the Arminians' own definition, and since this first act fixes and determines all the subsequent acts in the chain, none of the following acts can be free either. Edwards illustrates with the image of a chain of links: if only the first link is moved from outside, and each subsequent link only follows the one before it, then no link — not even the ones moved "by" other links — is self-moving. He also compares the will to the beam of a balance scale, where the position of the pointer at any moment is wholly a function of the weights already placed on either side, not of any independent power residing in the beam itself. The whole Arminian scheme of self-determination, he concludes, destroys itself and cannot even be coherently stated, since the very phrase presupposes exactly the kind of prior determining act that generates the contradiction. Edwards adds that this problem cannot be escaped by simply asserting that the soul, rather than a prior act of will, is what determines the will's acts — for on the Arminian view it is not enough that the soul determines its acts by its nature, understanding, or circumstances; the soul must determine them freely, and freely, for the Arminian, means by its own antecedent choice, which returns the argument to its starting point.

"If the first act in the train, determining and fixing the rest, be not free, none of them all can be free."

"Thus, this Arminian notion of liberty of the will, consisting in the will's self-determination, is repugnant to itself, and shuts itself wholly out of the world."

Sect. II. Several Supposed Ways of Evading the Foregoing Reasoning, Considered

SUMMARY

Anticipating objections, Edwards considers ways Arminians might try to escape the regress of Section I — for instance, by claiming the will determines its own act not through a prior act, but simply "in" the very act of willing itself, with no temporal or even logical priority involved. Edwards dismantles three possible versions of this move. First, if the determining act is prior in the order of nature (even without being prior in time), it is still a distinct cause from its effect, and the regress returns. Second, if the "determining" is simply identical with the "exerting" of the act — so that the exertion causes itself — this is an outright contradiction, making a thing prior to and distinct from itself. Third, if it is claimed that volition simply arises with no cause or ground of its particular existence at all, this amounts to admitting that acts of will are utterly uncaused events — mere products of "nothing." Edwards presses this last point hard: if this is truly what Arminians mean by the will's "self-determination," their entire vocabulary of sovereignty and self-determining power is empty, since in truth nothing is determining anything — an absurdity he says is nonetheless implicit in their scheme, since they insist volitions are radically contingent events. He notes the irony that a doctrine advertised as exalting the dignity and sovereignty of the soul, upon inspection, actually strips the soul of all real agency, making it the helpless occasion rather than the author of its own choices. If a volition truly has no cause, then strictly speaking it is not the soul's act at all in any meaningful sense, since nothing about the soul explains why this volition occurred rather than some other, or none at all. Edwards insists this is no minor technicality but the very crux of the entire dispute: the name "self-determination" is retained while the substance of it — actual determination by the self — is quietly abandoned.

"There is a great noise made about self-determining power, as the source of all free acts of the will: but when the matter comes to be explained... they arise from nothing; no cause, no power, no influence, being at all concerned in the matter."

Sect. III. Whether Any Event Whatsoever, and Volition in Particular, Can Come to Pass Without a Cause of Its Existence

SUMMARY

Having shown that Arminian liberty seems to require volitions without a cause, Edwards now argues that nothing whatsoever — volition included — can come into existence without some cause or ground. He first defines "cause" broadly, to include not only things with positive productive efficiency but any antecedent (even a negative condition, like the sun's absence causing cold) that explains why something is as it is rather than otherwise. He then asserts, as a foundational dictate of common sense, that whatever begins to exist must have some cause of its beginning; to deny this destroys all reasoning from effects to

causes, including all natural theology and all everyday inference about the world (including, notably, the very arguments used to prove God's existence from His creation). If things could pop into being uncaused, there would be no reason such things shouldn't occur constantly and universally — yet if only one very particular category of events (namely, human volitions) supposedly enjoyed this privilege of causeless existence, occurring in a regular, patterned way across all times and persons, this itself is proof that something systematic — not blind contingency — governs them. Contingency, Edwards insists, is blind and indiscriminate; it cannot explain why only one type of event (volition) should reliably occur in a law-like way. He offers an analogy: if rain sometimes fell as liquid water and, with equal likelihood, sometimes as solid stones or some other substance entirely, we would rightly suspect some hidden cause governing which form it took on any given occasion; the very regularity and specificity of an effect is itself evidence against its being truly uncaused. Edwards also insists that denying the causal maxim would be self-defeating for the Arminians themselves, since their own doctrine of God's existence, and indeed nearly every article of natural religion, depends on inferring causes from their effects; to exempt volitions alone from this universal principle, without any principled reason for the exemption, is simply special pleading in service of a predetermined theological conclusion.

"What is self-existent must be from eternity, and must be unchangeable; but as to all things that begin to be, they are not self-existent, and therefore must have some foundation of their existence without themselves."

"This contingency, this efficient nothing, this effectual no-cause, is always ready at hand to produce this sort of effects, as long as the agent exists."

Sect. IV. Whether Volition Can Arise Without a Cause, Through the Activity of the Nature of the Soul

SUMMARY

Edwards next addresses a specific rebuttal: perhaps the soul, being an "active being," can generate volitions from its own inherent activity, without needing any further cause. He replies that this misses the point entirely. The real question was never whether the soul is active (i.e., whether it acts at all) but why it acts in this particular way rather than another — why this volition, rather than a different one, at this moment. Simply citing "activity of nature" as a general capacity does not explain the specific direction or content of a given act of will, any more than saying a man does something "because he has activity" explains why he does that particular thing. Moreover, since any exercise of activity must itself be an act, and any act needs a cause for why it takes the specific shape it does, appealing to activity just pushes the problem back one step without resolving it: the "first exercise" of the soul's activity would have to be its own cause, which is contradictory, since a thing cannot exist prior to itself in order to produce itself. Edwards presses the point with an analogy: to say a stone falls "because it has gravity" explains why it falls at all, but not why it falls at this particular speed, in this particular direction, at this particular moment rather than another; likewise, saying the soul is "active" explains that it can produce effects, but not why it produces this volition, at this time, rather than a different one or none at all. Something further must

account for that specificity, and no amount of appeal to a general active nature supplies it. Edwards also observes that if the soul is active only insofar as it is "voluntary" or "elective," then the soul's activity cannot itself produce the very first act of will, since that would mean the will electively producing itself before it exists to elect anything.

"Activity of nature will no more enable a being to produce effects, and determine the manner of their existence, within itself, without a cause, than out of itself, in some other being."

Sect. V. Showing That If These Evasions Were True, They Would Be Impertinent, and Could Not Help the Cause of Arminian Liberty

SUMMARY

Even granting, for argument's sake, that volitions might arise uncaused through the soul's "active nature," Edwards argues this still would not rescue the Arminian position. Arminian liberty specifically requires that the will determine its own acts — meaning the soul chooses its own volitions by willing them. But "willing" a thing just is choosing it; so for the will to determine an act, there must be some antecedent act of choice determining it — precisely the regress Section I already exposed. If, instead, the soul's acts are said to be determined by something other than choice (say, by "activity" alone, without any exercise of will), then the will isn't really self-determining after all, and no liberty (in the Arminian sense of being determined by one's own will and pleasure) is exercised. Either way, the Arminian notion collapses; it is, Edwards says, an entirely impertinent evasion, since granting the premise does not deliver the conclusion Arminians need. Edwards illustrates the resulting inconsistency using Dr. Whitby, a prominent Arminian divine, who condemns the Calvinist notion of liberty (as mere power to do what one wills, according to one's own choice and pleasure) as identical to Hobbes's hated determinism — yet elsewhere approvingly quotes several early church fathers, including Origen, Justin Martyr, and Macarius, endorsing exactly that same notion — freedom as acting according to one's own choice — as the true and ancient meaning of liberty. Edwards presses that this very notion, examined closely, reintroduces the same infinite regress problem he had already exposed, so Whitby's own authorities undercut his own position.

"There must be two acts of the will in the case, one going before another... and the latter the object of the former, and chosen by the former."

"So that... their notion destroys itself... whatever way they turn."

Sect. VI. Concerning the Will's Determining in Things Which Are Perfectly Indifferent in the View of the Mind

SUMMARY

A favorite Arminian argument for self-determining power appeals to trivial cases — pointing a finger up or down, choosing between two identical eggs or cakes — where we seem to choose freely between options with no motive favoring either. Edwards attacks this from two directions. First, the argument is self-contradictory: to say the will chooses between equally indifferent options is to say the mind prefers while having no preference — a plain absurdity, especially since the cited author admits the sense of

pleasure in a choice arises only *after* and *because of* the choice, meaning the choice itself must already have occurred without any explanatory preference — an incoherent circle. Second, Edwards offers a positive account: careful attention to such cases (like touching one square of a chessboard) reveals several nested acts of will, each of which does have a "preponderating" reason behind it — even if that reason is merely to follow "accident," such as whichever object happens to catch the eye first. Such accidents are not causeless; they belong to the ordinary, explicable course of things. What confuses people, Edwards suggests, is conflating indifference to the *objects* chosen with indifference regarding the *actions* of choosing them, and conflating a general remote indifference with a particular immediate one. He works through the chessboard example in detail: though the mind may be entirely indifferent as to which particular square is touched in relation to the person's ultimate purpose (perhaps merely to comply with a request), the very act of moving the hand toward one specific square rather than another is never itself indifferent at the instant it occurs, since something — however trivial, such as the position of the hand or the direction of the eyes — tips the balance. Edwards concludes that apparent cases of choice amid indifference, properly analyzed, always dissolve into a series of causally explicable micro-decisions, none of which is ever made without some however slight preponderating circumstance.

"To suppose the will to act at all in a state of perfect indifference... is to assert that the mind chooses without choosing."

"As the acts of the will, in each step of the fore-mentioned procedure, do not come to pass without a particular cause, every act is owing to a prevailing inducement."

Sect. VII. Concerning the Notion of Liberty of Will, Consisting in Indifference

SUMMARY

Edwards now attacks head-on the idea that liberty requires the will to be in a state of perfect equilibrium — free from any prior inclination — before it acts. He argues this notion is self-defeating at its root: any free act, by definition, must be performed *in* a state of freedom, not merely follow one. But choice itself is precisely the ending of indifference; the very moment of preferring one thing is the moment indifference ceases. So no act can ever occur *while* the mind remains indifferent — meaning that, on this account, no act of will could ever be genuinely free, since freedom (as equilibrium) and volition (as the ending of equilibrium) are mutually exclusive, "as much as motion and rest, or life and death." Edwards works through several fallback positions — that the will "changes itself" out of indifference while still being in a state of freedom, or that liberty consists merely in a power to *suspend* choice until deliberation is possible — and shows each one either reintroduces the same contradiction or generates an infinite regress of suspensions-of-suspensions, since the very act of suspending is itself a volition needing its own explanation. He notes that if the will's determination to suspend judgment is itself something the will freely chooses, then that choice, on Arminian premises, must equally have occurred either in a state of prior indifference (returning the very problem it was meant to solve) or by some prior determination (again yielding necessity). Edwards observes that the entire notion trades on an ambiguity between two

very different ideas: a mere negative absence of any actual choice yet made, which is unremarkable, and a positive state of the will poised in genuine equilibrium between competing options, which he has shown to be impossible to combine with any actual exercise of choosing.

“Choice and preference can no more be in a state of indifference, than motion can be in a state of rest.”

“Freedom is perfectly at an end, and has ceased to be, at the first moment of action.”

Sect. VIII. Concerning the Supposed Liberty of the Will, as Opposite to All Necessity

SUMMARY

Edwards now targets the Arminian claim that free volitions are "contingent" in the strongest sense — not merely uncoerced, but utterly disconnected from any necessitating cause. Building on Section III's proof that nothing occurs uncaused, he argues that anything with a cause must be *necessarily* connected to that cause — otherwise the supposed "cause" wouldn't truly explain the effect at all. If an effect could either follow or not follow from the very same cause under the very same circumstances, then whatever decided which outcome occurred would itself need explaining, generating an appeal to a further, hidden causeless event — which is precisely what was already ruled out. Edwards concludes that the concept of an event's having "a cause" but not being "necessarily connected" to it is incoherent: dependence on a cause and necessary connection to that cause are the same relation described two ways — to have a cause that does not necessitate its effect is, in effect, to have a cause which is not really its cause. Since volitions do have causes (as Sections IX and X will show in detail), they cannot be contingent in the radical, uncaused sense Arminians require. Edwards further notes that this closes off any middle ground some writers attempt to carve out between strict necessity and pure chance; there is, he insists, no coherent third category, so every effect must belong to one or the other, and an effect with a real cause simply cannot be called contingent in the sense the Arminian scheme demands.

“Every effect has a necessary connexion with its cause, or with that which is the true ground and reason of its existence.”

Sect. IX. Of the Connexion of the Acts of the Will with the Dictates of the Understanding

SUMMARY

Edwards now shows that the will is necessarily tied to the understanding's judgments about the greatest apparent good — a position, he notes, that even prominent Arminians like Dr. Whitby and Dr. Samuel Clarke concede. Whitby himself insists, against Calvinists, that the will infallibly follows whatever the understanding judges to be the greatest good or evil once fully considered — indeed, he calls it self-contradictory to suppose otherwise. But Edwards turns this concession against Whitby's own liberty scheme: if the will's determination always necessarily follows the understanding's view, then the will does not determine itself in any of its acts; every act of choice is necessarily fixed by something outside the will

(the understanding's judgment), contrary to the self-determining power Arminians insist upon. Attempts to save the scheme by positing a prior free act of will that determines whether to attend to the evidence merely push the same necessity back a step, since that prior act too must follow some judgment of the understanding. And if Dr. Clarke's alternative — that the "last dictate of understanding" simply is the will's determination — is adopted, this only produces the same infinite regress problem, now relocated into the understanding itself, since that dictate must then be explained by some prior state of the understanding, and so on without end. Edwards observes that this entire dispute reveals something telling: Arminian writers, when arguing against Calvinist accounts of grace and depravity, freely assume the very necessary connection between judgment and volition that their own liberty scheme, taken on its own terms, cannot allow — showing they implicitly rely on the truth of the position they officially reject.

"The soul always wills or chooses that which, in the present view of the mind... appears most agreeable."

"What we do really believe to be our chiefest good will still be chosen; and what we apprehend to be the worst of evils... will be refused by us."

Sect. X. Volition Necessarily Connected with the Influence of Motives: With Particular Observations on the Great Inconsistence of Mr Chubb's Assertions and Reasonings About the Freedom of the Will

SUMMARY

Edwards argues every volition is excited by some motive — otherwise the will would aim at and seek nothing, which contradicts the very nature of willing. Since motives thus function as causes, and effects are necessarily connected to their causes (Section VIII), volitions are necessarily connected to the motives that excite them. Edwards then devotes the bulk of the section to a sustained, almost forensic critique of Thomas Chubb, a contemporary freethinking writer who tried to hold together two claims Edwards shows to be flatly incompatible: (1) that no volition can occur without a prior motive inducing it, and (2) that the will freely chooses, prior to being moved, whether to comply with any motive at all — making the motive's influence itself the *product*, not the *cause*, of an act of will. Edwards shows this makes the very same motive both prior and consequent to the choice it supposedly grounds — "the son beforehand with the father that begets him." He further catches Chubb asserting that the will sometimes follows the *weaker* rather than the stronger motive, which — if true — would mean the will acts with no previous ground whatsoever in that instance, undermining Chubb's own insistence that no volition occurs without a motive. Chubb is likewise shown contradicting himself over whether motives are genuine "causes," at once denying this (to preserve the will's self-moving sovereignty) while repeatedly describing motives as things that "excite," "induce," and "produce" volition — which is simply what causation means. Edwards singles out Chubb's peculiar phrase calling motives a "passive ground" of action, arguing this is nonsensical on its face: to be a "ground" that genuinely accounts for why an action occurs is already to be active in the relevant sense, regardless of what label is attached to it. He closes the section by showing that even Chubb's own preferred description of the will's "self-moving power" undoes Chubb's case: Chubb himself

states that once this self-moving power is exerted, it becomes the necessary cause of its effects — which is to concede, in Chubb's own words, that the effects of the will's exertion are necessary, exactly the conclusion Chubb's entire tract was written to resist.

"No action can take place without some motive to excite it... Volition cannot take place without some previous reason or motive to induce it."

"The very same motive is both previous and consequent, both before and after, both the ground and fruit of the very same thing!"

Sect. XI. The Evidence of God's Certain Foreknowledge of the Volitions of Moral Agents

SUMMARY

Edwards turns to a wholly independent line of argument: Scripture demonstrates that God certainly foreknows the free volitions of moral agents, which — as the next section will show — is itself incompatible with those volitions being uncaused, contingent events. He first establishes two logical axioms: if God does not foreknow an event, He cannot truly predict it (only guess), and if He does not foreknow a volition, He cannot foreknow anything that depends on that volition. He then marshals an extensive catalogue of biblical prophecies concerning human moral conduct — Pharaoh's hardened refusal, Judas's betrayal, Peter's denial, the future wickedness of Hazael and Antiochus Epiphanes, the repentance of the exiled Jews, the rejection of Christ by the Jewish leaders, the persecution of the apostles — all delivered as absolute, certain predictions, many confirmed by oath, and often depending on immense chains of subsequent free human choices (dynasties, empires, and their wars) for their fulfillment. Edwards even traces how seemingly trivial accidents — such as the neighing of a horse determining a disputed royal succession in Persia — set in motion political chains eventually bearing on Alexander's conquests and, through them, on the entire subsequent history of the known world, all of which Scripture treats as within God's settled foreknowledge. If God's knowledge of future free acts were merely probable conjecture, Edwards argues, virtually every prophecy in Scripture, and the entire promise-structure of redemption (fixed "before the foundation of the world"), would rest on nothing but guesswork — and God himself would be perpetually liable to disappointment, regret, and revision of His plans, which Scripture explicitly denies, affirming instead that God is not a man that he should repent, and that his counsel and purpose stand forever unchanged.

"If God has no more than an uncertain guess concerning events of this kind, then he can declare no more than an uncertain guess."

"I know the evil thou wilt do unto the children of Israel: thou wilt dash their children" — cited as evidence the prophets spoke of foreknown, not merely guessed, moral conduct."

Sect. 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

SUMMARY

Having established that God foreknows free volitions, Edwards now proves that this foreknowledge entails their necessity. His core argument: whatever is infallibly connected to something that already necessarily exists is itself necessary. God's foreknowledge, by hypothesis, already exists (has existed from eternity); therefore anything infallibly connected to it — the future volition itself — is as necessary as the foreknowledge is. To claim a volition is genuinely contingent (such that it might not occur) while also being infallibly known in advance is self-contradictory, since certain knowledge without evidence is impossible, and an inherently undetermined event provides no evidence, self-evident or otherwise, of what it will turn out to be. Edwards also rebuts the Arminian counter that foreknowledge, unlike a decree, has no causal "influence" on the event and therefore doesn't make it necessary: he replies that whether or not foreknowledge *causes* necessity is irrelevant — infallible knowledge still *proves* necessity, regardless of the direction of causal dependence, just as reliable after-the-fact knowledge proves a past event certain without having caused it. He also takes up, and dismisses, the objection that God, having no succession of thoughts and viewing all of time in one timeless, eternal glance, cannot be said to "foreknow" in the ordinary temporal sense at all; Edwards replies that this does nothing to weaken the argument, since even on this view every future event is as fixed and present to the divine mind as if it had already occurred, which if anything strengthens rather than loosens the necessary connection between God's knowledge and the event known. He closes by noting that this argument gives Calvinists a pointed defense: their doctrine of absolute decrees implies no more necessity than the Arminians' own admission of God's omniscient foreknowledge already implies, so Arminian objections against Calvinist "fatalism" apply with equal force against their own theology, and cannot be pressed against Calvinists without recoiling upon themselves.

"If there be any infallible knowledge of future volitions, the event is necessary; or, in other words, it is impossible but the event should come to pass."

"There must be a certainty in things themselves, before they are certainly known... this is nothing but the necessity of the truth known."

Sect. XIII. Whether We Suppose the Volitions of Moral Agents to Be Connected with Anything Antecedent, or Not, Yet They Must Be Necessary in Such a Sense as to Overthrow Arminian Liberty

SUMMARY

Edwards closes Part II with a decisive dilemma. Every act of will either has a cause or it does not. If it has a cause — even if that cause is a prior act of the will itself — then, as already shown, the act is necessarily connected to and determined by that cause, and is therefore necessary, not free in the Arminian sense. If, on the other hand, the act of will has no cause at all, occurring by pure "contingence," then no act or choice of the soul had any hand in producing it; the soul is merely the passive subject of what happens to it, exactly as necessarily as if some cause had fixed it — since, having no cause, it could not have been otherwise through any exercise of the soul's pleasure. Either way, then, the will's acts turn out to be

"necessary" in a sense fatal to the Arminian requirement that liberty consist in the will's own uncaused, sovereign self-determination. Edwards further observes that the "chance" invoked to rescue indifferent, causeless volition is defined by its own advocates as the absence of design — yet the will is supposed to be "the spring of all design," making its own acts by chance a contradiction of the very scheme meant to secure them. This sets up the transition to Part III, where Edwards will ask whether such Arminian liberty, having been shown incoherent, is even required for moral responsibility in the first place. Edwards also briefly considers a further fallback: perhaps liberty consists simply in the will's disengagement from any governing connection with the dictates of the understanding, so that the more unconstrained by reason the will is, the freer it is. He turns this back on its advocates by pointing out what it would actually mean in its fullest, most perfect form — a will acting completely at random, wholly unguided by any view, reason, or consideration whatsoever, no more intelligent in its operation than smoke driven by the wind. Far from being a dignity worth prizing, Edwards observes, such total disconnection from reason would be the emptying-out of everything that makes the will's operations meaningful or praiseworthy in the first place, and no rational person, on reflection, would actually wish for such a liberty for themselves.

"By this all the free acts of the will are necessary, and yet are not necessary: because they cannot be free... unless they are determined by the will... which is to be determined by antecedent choice; which... proves them necessary. And yet they say, necessity is utterly inconsistent with liberty."

"The will, or the soul, was indeed the subject of what happened to it accidentally, but was not the cause."

Source: 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" (1754), Part II, prepared from OCR-extracted public-domain text.

Part III — Whether Arminian Liberty Is Necessary to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Praise and Blame

Having argued in Part I and Part II that the Arminian notion of "liberty of indifference" (a will free from all necessity, able to determine itself) is incoherent, Edwards turns in Part III to a second question: even granting such liberty could exist, is it actually *required* for moral agency, virtue, vice, praise, blame, reward, and punishment? Edwards answers no — and argues that necessity is not only compatible with moral responsibility but that Arminian "liberty of indifference" is actually *destructive* of virtue.

Sect. I. God's moral excellency necessary, yet virtuous and praiseworthy

SUMMARY

Edwards opens by pressing the Arminians' own logic against them. Their spokesman, Dr. Whitby, insists that necessity is incompatible with anything being praiseworthy or blameworthy — that no one can be praised for what he could not help. Yet Christian teaching, which Arminians themselves affirm, holds that God is *necessarily* holy: God cannot fail to be good, cannot lie, cannot sin. If Whitby's principle is followed consistently, this makes God's holiness no more virtuous than the fertility of soil or the brightness of the sun — good, perhaps, but not praiseworthy, since it is not freely chosen from a state of indifference between good and evil. Edwards finds this conclusion monstrous and unbiblical: Scripture everywhere presents God as supremely worthy of love, admiration, gratitude, and praise precisely on account of his moral excellence. If necessity truly excluded praiseworthiness, humans — with their small, imperfect, and inconsistent virtue — would somehow be more praiseworthy than God himself, who is perfectly and unchangeably good. This, Edwards says, is absurd on its face. He concludes that necessity does not undermine the reality or the honor due to moral excellence; on the contrary, God's necessary goodness is the very pattern and fountain of all created virtue. The reason God is not, strictly speaking, "rewarded" is not that his goodness lacks merit, but simply that he is infinitely above needing or receiving any benefit from creatures — not because necessity cancels virtue.

"If all human actions are necessary, virtue and vice must be empty names... for who can blame a person for doing only what he could not help?"

"The infinitely holy God... according to this notion of Dr Whitby... has no virtue at all: virtue, when ascribed to him, is but an empty name."

Sect. II. The acts of the will of the human soul of Jesus Christ necessarily holy, yet virtuous, praiseworthy, rewardable

SUMMARY

Edwards extends the same argument to Christ's human nature. He marshals an extensive array of Old and New Testament promises — sworn with divine oaths to Abraham, David, and the prophets — guaranteeing that the Messiah would persevere in perfect holiness and successfully accomplish redemption. Because God's absolute promises cannot fail, it was strictly impossible for Christ's human will ever to sin; his holiness was therefore necessary, not the product of a contingent, "either-way" freedom. Yet Scripture unambiguously treats Christ's obedience as supremely virtuous, meritorious, and rewarded: the Father loves the Son for his obedience, promises him a kingdom and glory, and the heavenly hosts sing that the Lamb is "worthy." Christ is also depicted as being tempted, tried, and acting under real commands and promises — the very marks Arminians say require indifferent, self-determining freedom. If necessity truly voided praiseworthiness, then Christ's entire life of obedience unto death would be no more meritorious than the workings of a clock — a conclusion Edwards regards as blasphemous. He concludes that perfect, necessary holiness in Christ is not merely compatible with supreme virtue and reward, but is its highest exemplar, meant to be the pattern believers are called to imitate.

"It was impossible that the acts of the will of the human soul of Christ should, in any instance, degree, or circumstance, be otherwise than holy, and agreeable to God's nature and will."

"How strange would it be to hear any Christian assert... that virtue, when applied to these things, is but an empty name; that there was no merit in any of these things."

Sect. III. The case of such as are given up of God to sin, and of fallen man in general, proves moral necessity and inability consistent with blameworthiness

SUMMARY

Edwards next turns to Scripture's teaching that God sometimes judicially "gives up" hardened sinners to their own lusts (citing Psalm 81, Acts 7, and Romans 1), so that their continuing in sin becomes, in some sense, a necessary consequence of God's judicial act. If Whitby's principle were true — that necessity always excuses — then Judas would be blameless for betraying Christ after being "given over," and idolaters explicitly consigned to their sin by divine oath would be innocent. Since this is plainly contrary to Scripture (which treats Judas's betrayal as intensely sinful), the Arminian principle must be false. Edwards then generalizes: even Whitby admits that being "given up" makes resisting sin *extremely difficult*, though not, on his view, strictly impossible. But Edwards shows this concession is self-defeating: if impossibility fully excuses, then by the same logic, degrees of difficulty must excuse proportionally — meaning the more habituated and difficult to resist a sin becomes, the *less* blameworthy it is. This would mean hardened, vicious habits make people progressively less guilty the more deeply corrupt they become — an outcome contrary to all moral sense, which recognizes that a strong, settled bias toward evil makes someone *more*, not less, blameworthy. Edwards uses an illustration of a weighted balance-scale to show that under Arminian logic, difficulty always exactly offsets blame, leaving guilt strangely constant regardless of the strength of one's sinful inclination.

"If not only co-action, but all necessity, will prove men blameless, then Judas was blameless, after Christ had given him over, and had already declared his certain damnation."

"The fault of such persons must be lessened, in proportion to the difficulty, and approach to impossibility" — which Edwards presents as an absurd consequence of Arminian premises."

Sect. IV. Command and obligation to obedience consistent with moral inability to obey

SUMMARY

Here Edwards addresses the core Arminian objection: how can God justly command something a person is morally unable to do? He first argues that the will itself — not merely outward bodily actions — is the proper and direct object of divine commands, since obedience and disobedience most fundamentally consist in the will's compliance or opposition. Because the will's own leading, determining act cannot be caused or altered by a prior act of will (that would require an infinite regress), a person whose will opposes a command is, in that moment, morally unable to obey — yet this inability does not excuse him, because it consists simply in the strength of his own sinful disposition, not in any external incapacity. Edwards carefully distinguishes moral inability (rooted in a bad heart or wrong desires) from natural inability (rooted in lack of bodily power or understanding); only the latter genuinely excuses. He also refines the point: moral inability is not all equal in degree — some inclinations are harder to overcome than others, much as lifting different weights requires different strength — yet even the "easier" cases remain instances of true (moral) inability. Commands may rightly require states of will that do not yet exist and that the commanded person may fail to produce even after the command is given; otherwise disobedience would be impossible and commands pointless. Edwards closes by noting that invitations function the same way as commands, so this reasoning also answers the Arminian claim that God's sincere gospel invitations presuppose that sinners have full ability to accept them.

"The will, in every instance, acts by moral necessity, and is morally unable to act otherwise, as truly and properly in one case as another."

"Natural inability, arising from the want of natural capacity, or external hinderance... without doubt wholly excuses... [but moral inability] never can excuse any person in disobedience."

Sect. V. That sincerity of desires and endeavours supposed to excuse the non-performance of good things, considered

SUMMARY

Edwards examines the common claim that sinners who sincerely desire and try to do good, but fail, should be excused. He argues this rests on an absurdity: it is contradictory to suppose someone truly and directly wills to have a right inclination while still being, at present, contrary to that inclination — since to genuinely will something is already to have that inclination, at least in that respect. What such people actually have, Edwards argues, is only an *indirect*, self-interested wish — as with a miserly drunkard who wishes he had no craving for drink only because it costs him money, not because he loves temperance, or a wicked man who wishes for love of Christ only to escape hell, not because he loves God. Such wishes

terminate on some other object (money, safety) rather than on the virtue itself, and so contain no actual goodness capable of counterbalancing the sin of failing to obey. Sincerity in this indirect sense is morally neutral — one can be sincerely wicked as easily as sincerely good (even devils sincerely wished to escape torment). Edwards distinguishes this "common" sincerity (mere reality of desire, regardless of its motive) from true "gracious" sincerity (a pure, virtuous intention, wanted for its own sake) — only the latter has any acceptability before God. Such indirect, self-interested endeavors, however earnest, add no positive moral weight; at best they may have a "negatively good" effect of preventing worse sins, but they cannot substitute for or excuse the absence of real virtue.

"It is absurd to suppose that a man should directly, properly, and sincerely incline to have an inclination, which at the same time is contrary to his inclination."

"A being sincere, hearty, and in good earnest, is no virtue, unless it be in a thing that is virtuous. A man may be sincere and hearty in joining a crew of pirates."

Sect. VI. Liberty of indifference not only not necessary to virtue but inconsistent with it; virtuous/vicious habits inconsistent with Arminian notions

SUMMARY

Edwards now argues that Arminian "liberty of indifference" is not merely unnecessary for virtue but actively incompatible with it. If virtuous acts must be performed from a state of indifference (to preserve self-determining freedom), then the more indifferent and unmoved the heart is while acting, the more "free," and so — absurdly — the more virtuous the act would be. But common sense says the opposite: virtue lies precisely in a strong, settled inclination toward good, and the stronger that inclination, the more praiseworthy the act, not less. Edwards also shows that mere indifference toward horrendous acts (blasphemy, murder) would itself be vicious, not neutral, contradicting the idea that indifference is a morally safe starting point. Most damagingly, he argues that Arminian principles cannot account for virtuous or vicious *habits* and settled character at all: since a fixed disposition (bias) is by definition the opposite of indifference, any established habit of goodness or wickedness — however strong — would have to be morally neutral, since it eliminates the equilibrium supposedly required for freedom. Carried to its logical end, this reasoning would mean the more deeply entrenched someone's malice, cruelty, or pride becomes, the less blameworthy they are, and likewise the more powerful someone's holiness or love, the less praiseworthy — even applying this absurdity to Christ and to God himself, whose goodness is maximally fixed and thus, on Arminian terms, maximally distant from praiseworthiness. Edwards concludes that on these premises virtue and vice are excluded from the universe altogether — habits cannot be virtuous, nor can actions arising from habits, nor can actions arising from no disposition at all (since these would be mere random contingency, like a tree being struck by lightning).

"The stronger the inclination, and so the further from indifference, the more virtuous the heart, and so much the more praiseworthy the act which proceeds from it?"

"The more violent men's lusts are, the more fixed their pride, envy, ingratitude, and maliciousness, still the further are they from being blameworthy" — the absurd result Edwards derives from Arminian premises."

Sect. VII. Arminian notions of moral agency inconsistent with all influence of motive and inducement

SUMMARY

Finally, Edwards argues that Arminian liberty is incompatible with motives having any real influence on the will at all — yet motives (reasons, persuasions, promises, warnings) obviously do move people, and all moral instruction assumes this. If a motive genuinely sways the will toward one option, it thereby removes the will's indifference and "biases" it — which Arminians must count as a loss of freedom, hence a loss of virtue. Edwards presses this with a scale-of-degrees argument: if an overwhelmingly strong ("invincible") motive destroys liberty entirely, then a motive with half that strength must destroy half the liberty, proportionally — and since "nothing," however multiplied, remains nothing, if the weakest motive has zero effect on liberty, then no amount of motive, however great, could affect liberty either; the theory cannot consistently allow motives any partial influence. He notes the deeply troubling implication: on Arminian premises, God's own counsels, exhortations, promises, and warnings to sinners — and even the work of the Holy Spirit — can have no real tendency to produce virtue, since any influence they exert would undermine the self-determining freedom virtue supposedly requires. This would make God either powerless to promote virtue or, worse, insincere in offering means that cannot achieve their professed end — the very charge of hypocrisy Arminians level against Calvinists. Edwards concludes that Arminian principles, followed to their logical conclusion, banish virtue and vice from the universe entirely, since an act done for no motive and no end cannot be an act of will at all, and one done from motive is, by their own logic, not free.

"If one degree of the influence of motive does not at all infringe or diminish liberty, then no more do two degrees; for nothing doubled, is still nothing."

"It clearly follows, from these principles, that God has no hand in any man's virtue, nor does at all promote it, either by a physical or moral influence."

PART IV. The Grounds of Arminian Reasoning Examined

Sect. I. The essence of the virtue and vice of dispositions of the heart and acts of the will lies not in their cause but their nature

SUMMARY

Edwards opens Part IV by attacking what he sees as the foundational error underlying all Arminian arguments for libertarian free will: the claim that the moral goodness or badness of a disposition or act of will lies not in the disposition or act itself, but entirely in its cause. On this view, even a perfectly good act of will is not praiseworthy unless it originated from the agent's own uncaused self-determination, and a bad act is not blameworthy unless it likewise sprang from the agent's own fault, not from any prior necessity. Edwards argues this is not just mistaken but absurd. If virtue or vice cannot lie in the nature of a thing but only in its cause, then by the same logic it cannot lie in the nature of that cause either — it must lie in the cause of the cause, and so on infinitely backward. This regress can never terminate in anything blameworthy, because at every step the blame is pushed further back; and if it ever reaches an uncaused first cause, the fault must, by the objector's own logic, lie in the nature of that uncaused thing — which is exactly what was supposedly impossible. The theory thus destroys itself and banishes moral evil from the universe entirely. Edwards insists that common sense actually locates vice in the very deformity of a wicked disposition or act itself — ingratitude is hateful because ingratitude is inherently ugly, not because some prior act caused it. He criticizes a contemporary author (later identified as Samuel Webster/the "Scripture Doctrine of Original Sin" writer) who argued that "a necessary holiness is no holiness," since this would mean Adam's original righteousness, not itself preceded by a choice to be righteous, could not have been righteousness at all — an absurd conclusion. Edwards traces this error to an illegitimate transfer of a true principle about external bodily actions (whose moral quality does derive from the volitions that cause them) onto volitions themselves, which have no prior volition as their cause and must be judged by their own nature.

"If the essence of virtuousness or commendableness, and of viciousness or fault, does not lie in the nature of the dispositions or acts of mind... but in their cause, then it is certain it lies no where at all."

"To say, that vice does not consist in the thing which is vicious, but in its cause, is the same as to say, that vice does not consist in vice, but in that which produces it."

Sect. II. The falseness and inconsistency of the metaphysical notion of action and agency held by defenders of Arminian liberty

SUMMARY

Edwards next dismantles the Arminian concept of "action," which requires that a true act be self-determined and uncaused by anything but the agent's own sovereign will, so that it can be neither

necessary nor the effect of anything prior. He shows this notion is riddled with self-contradiction: it demands that an action be both the effect of a preceding choice and yet not caused by anything; that it be necessary (since it must follow from choice) and yet also utterly free from necessity; that it begin motion absolutely and yet be consequent upon a prior exertion of will. Using the memorable image of a traveler's report of an impossible animal that "begat and brought forth itself" and "took a step before the first step," Edwards argues that the Arminian notion of action corresponds to no coherent idea at all — it is a word without meaning, self-cancelling in its very definition. He then traces how the word "action" is actually used in common speech: for voluntary bodily motion, for the workings of inanimate causes (a spring "acting" on a watch's gears), and occasionally for exercises of mind like willing or hating — but never for an inherently uncaused, self-originating exertion. The philosophers' error, Edwards suggests, arose because with external bodily actions it is true that a motion isn't properly "our" doing unless it flows from our will; philosophers unwarily extended this correct principle to volition itself, demanding that even our willing be caused by a prior act of willing — which is nonsensical, since there can be no volition before the very first volition. He closes by noting that even Arminian divines will not deny that God, who is supremely and necessarily holy and active, truly acts — showing that necessity and true agency are not actually incompatible even by their own admissions.

"It is nothing but a confusion of the mind, excited by words, without any distinct meaning, and is an absolute nonentity."

"Action and passion are doubtless, as they are sometimes used, words of opposite signification; but not as signifying opposite existences, but only opposite relations."

Sect. III. The reasons why some think it contrary to common sense that necessary things be worthy of praise or blame

SUMMARY

Here Edwards turns psychologist, explaining why so many people intuitively feel that necessity excludes praise and blame, even though (as he will argue in the next section) this feeling rests on a confusion. He identifies several causes. First, it is indeed a genuine dictate of common sense that *natural* necessity — compulsion against one's will, or an impossibility that holds regardless of one's inclination — excuses a person from blame or strips an act of praiseworthiness. Second, from early childhood we learn words like "cannot," "must," "unable," and "impossible" specifically in contexts of natural necessity (a child straining against something physically immovable), and this creates a deep habitual association between such words and blamelessness — an association as strong and automatic as our learned (but not truly natural) judgments about the size of distant objects. Third, when philosophers later apply these same words to a quite different kind of necessity — moral necessity, meaning the certain connection between a settled character and the choices that flow from it — the old association of blamelessness gets carried along unnoticed, because the terms sound the same and the two kinds of necessity share some superficial features (both involve certain connection and both are "prior to" the will in some sense). Fourth, people mistakenly imagine that under moral necessity a person might sincerely wish and strive to be otherwise

while an external necessity thwarts them — failing to see that a wicked man's vague wish to "have" a better will is not itself a virtuous act of will opposing his sin, but merely an indirect, self-interested desire to escape sin's painful consequences. Fifth, the sheer imagined size of eternal punishment makes the supposed injustice feel more vivid and persuasive than it would for a lesser penalty, even though logically the argument, if valid, would apply equally to any punishment at all.

"It is a very plain dictate of common sense, that natural necessity is wholly inconsistent with praise or blame."

"That a being accustomed to an union of different ideas, from early childhood, makes the habitual connexion exceeding strong, as though such connexion were owing to nature."

Sect. IV. It is agreeable to common sense and the natural notions of mankind that moral necessity is consistent with praise, blame, reward, punishment

SUMMARY

This is one of the pivotal sections of the whole treatise. Edwards argues directly that ordinary human judgment — apart from philosophical confusion — actually confirms that moral necessity is fully compatible with praise and blame. He analyzes the common notion of blameworthiness: it consists simply in a person "having his heart wrong, and doing wrong from his heart" — doing as one pleases, where one's pleasure (desire) itself is wrong. Ordinary people, including children who show a sense of desert almost as soon as they can think, never pause to ask whether the will was self-determined or externally caused; that metaphysical question simply never enters into anyone's natural judgment of praise or blame. Edwards presents a striking argument from proportionality: if moral necessity really did exclude praise and blame the way natural necessity does, then the closer an act approaches to moral necessity (through strong settled inclination), the less praiseworthy or blameworthy it should be — but everyone's actual moral sense says the opposite. A person who loves virtue with unshakeable, wholehearted strength is considered more virtuous, not less; a person driven by deeply rooted malice is considered more culpable, not excused. Natural, inborn temperaments — a naturally haughty or vicious disposition — are ordinarily treated as aggravating a person's guilt ("it is his very nature... he cannot help serving the devil") rather than excusing it, which shows that common sense clearly distinguishes moral from natural necessity in its effects on desert. Edwards illustrates the difference with an extended allegory of two prisoners offered pardon by their king: one is physically locked behind iron gates and sincerely wants to come out and beg forgiveness but cannot; the other's cell stands open, but his own proud, rebellious heart makes it certain — with as much necessity as the first case — that he will never choose to come out. Common sense, Edwards insists, judges these two very differently, holding the second prisoner fully blamable despite the necessity of his refusal, because that necessity lies in his own wicked heart rather than against it.

"The idea which the common people, through all ages and nations, have of faultiness... [is] a person's having his heart wrong, and doing wrong from his heart. And this is the sum total of the matter."

"So far is it from being agreeable to common sense, that... liberty as consists in indifference is requisite to praise or blame, that... the more he does either with full and strong inclination, the more is he esteemed or abhorred, commended or condemned."

Sect. V. Objections that this scheme of necessity renders all means and endeavours vain, and makes men mere machines

SUMMARY

Edwards answers the practical objection that if all events are necessarily connected to prior causes, then human effort and striving toward virtue or salvation are pointless, since the outcome is already fixed. He argues the opposite is true: means are effective precisely *because* of a reliable connection between antecedents (means) and consequents (ends). If there were no fixed connection between causes and effects at all — as the Arminian doctrine of contingent, self-determining volition actually implies — then there would be no basis whatsoever for expecting any means to produce any particular result; effort would be genuinely useless. Necessity, properly understood, is what makes deliberate effort rational, not what undermines it: a man who opens his eyes to see reasonably expects to see, precisely because eye-opening and seeing are reliably (i.e., necessarily) connected. Edwards then turns the tables, showing that consistent Arminian principles cannot even allow for reasonable conjecture about which means will help attain virtue, since on their scheme the will's determination is utterly independent of any antecedent influence, including one's own efforts. He also shows that anyone who tries to use the doctrine of necessity as an excuse for sloth — "since everything is already fixed, why bother?" — contradicts himself in the very act, since choosing to be idle for the sake of future ease is itself a case of aiming at and pursuing a future end by means, which the objector's own reasoning claims is futile. On the "mere machine" charge, Edwards responds that man remains utterly different from a machine because he possesses reason, understanding, and a will genuinely guided by his own perceptions and desires, and his actions and even many thoughts are subject to his choice — all the dignity that could reasonably be desired in freedom is preserved. Ironically, he suggests the Arminian scheme, which subjects the will to "blind contingency" rather than intelligent guidance, actually degrades human agency below the well-ordered operation of a machine guided by a skillful craftsman.

"For endeavours to be in vain, is for them not to be successful... The successfulness or unsuccessfulness of means... consists in those means being connected or not connected with the effect."

"Man is entirely, perfectly, and unspeakably different from a mere machine, in that he has reason and understanding, and has a faculty of will."

Sect. VI. The objection that it agrees with the Stoical doctrine and that of Mr. Hobbes

SUMMARY

Edwards briefly but pointedly dismisses the charge that his doctrine of necessity is merely disguised Stoic fatalism or Hobbesian materialism. He notes the double standard of opponents like Dr. Whitby, who cites

Stoic agreement with Calvinism as evidence against Calvinism, yet elsewhere cites Stoic agreement with Arminian positions as evidence *for* those positions — an inconsistency that exposes the argument as mere rhetorical maneuvering rather than genuine reasoning. Edwards observes that the Stoics were, by common Christian judgment, among the wisest and most virtuous of pagan philosophers, so agreement with them on some points is no embarrassment; truths are not tainted by having been held by imperfect or even wicked people, any more than the truth that Jesus is the Son of God was corrupted by being once declared by the devil. He explicitly disclaims any fatalism that would be inconsistent with real liberty (doing as one pleases), with the genuine efficacy of means and endeavors, or with the world's being governed by a wise personal God who acts by will, choice, and design — as opposed to blind, impersonal fate ruling even over the gods. As for Hobbes, Edwards candidly admits he has never read him, and argues that a true doctrine is not corrupted merely by having also been affirmed by a bad or unpopular author. He notes, turning the accusation around, that Arminians themselves share more doctrines with Hobbes than Calvinists do — on original sin, supernatural illumination, infused grace, and justification by faith alone.

"We need not reject all truth which is demonstrated by clear evidence, merely because it was once held by some bad man."

"If they held any such fate as is repugnant to any liberty, consisting in our doing as we please, I utterly deny such a fate."

Sect. VII. Concerning the necessity of the divine will

SUMMARY

Edwards confronts an objection that his principles, applied consistently, would mean even God's will is necessarily determined — supposedly demeaning to divine sovereignty, making God "a kind of mechanical medium of fate." Edwards responds that far from being dishonorable, it is God's highest glory that his will is invariably, necessarily determined by his own infinite wisdom toward what is best. He argues at length that necessity is not intrinsically a mark of inferiority or servitude: it is no more dishonorable for God to be necessarily wise and holy than it is for him to necessarily exist, since holiness and wisdom are themselves excellent, honorable qualities, and being unfailingly determined toward excellence is a perfection, not a defect. If anything, a God whose will could wander randomly, undirected by wisdom, would be the truly undignified and imperfect being. Edwards distinguishes this moral necessity of perfect fitness and wisdom from a servile, external "fate" that would constrain God from outside himself; the former flows from God's own nature and is fully compatible with — indeed constitutive of — his absolute sovereignty, supreme authority, and underived, self-sufficient wisdom. He supports this with extensive quotations from Samuel Clarke, John Locke, and others (even non-Calvinist authors) who acknowledge that a perfectly wise being cannot but choose what is best, and that this is no diminishment of freedom but its very perfection.

"It is no disadvantage or dishonour to a being, necessarily to act in the most excellent and happy manner, from the necessary perfection of his own nature."

"If it be a disadvantage for the Divine will to be attended with this moral necessity, then the more free from it... the greater dignity and advantage. And, consequently... to act absolutely at random, would be the supreme glory" [Edwards states this ironically, to show its absurdity]."

Sect. VIII. Some further objections against the moral necessity of God's volition considered

SUMMARY

Edwards addresses a subtler objection: that in many cases God chooses among genuinely equal or trivial alternatives (such as which of countless identical atoms to place where, or exactly when and where in infinite time and space to create the world), and in such cases there can be no "superior fitness" directing the choice, so God's will must sometimes act without any determining reason at all — undermining the claim that necessity governs all of God's volitions. Edwards responds on two fronts. First, he denies that infinite time and space are truly composed of distinguishable, measurable "parts" prior to creation at all; the objection rests on a false picture of eternity and infinity as things with parts, rather than eternity being simply God's own timeless mode of existence. Second, regarding supposedly identical atoms or particles, he argues it is in fact infinitely unlikely, given matter's infinite divisibility, that any two particles in the universe are ever perfectly identical in every respect; and even where God causes qualitatively identical effects in different places, that a particular figure or resistance be *there* rather than *elsewhere* is really no more mysterious than a person repeating the same words at two different moments — no one thinks that requires an uncaused, unmotivated decision. He also defends God's freedom in bestowing grace and mercy: supposing God has wise reasons for choosing particular objects of his favor (like the apostle Paul) does not diminish, but if anything enhances, the freeness and praiseworthiness of his grace, since a purely random, reasonless bestowal would be no more "gracious" than a wisely purposed one. Edwards closes the section by noting that ironically, Arminian theology — which holds that God's foreknowledge of future free choices is fixed and independent of his own will — makes God's will subject to an external, uncontrolled state of affairs, which is a far more genuinely servile subjection to necessity than anything in Calvinism.

"It is impossible for us to determine, with any certainty or evidence, that because the difference is very small... therefore there is absolutely no superior goodness... which can be proposed by the Creator."

"Something much more like a servile subjection of the Divine Being to fatal necessity, will follow from Arminian principles, than from the doctrines which they oppose."

Sect. IX. The objection that it makes God the author of sin

SUMMARY

This lengthy section tackles the most serious-sounding charge against Calvinistic necessity: that if God's decree and permission make sin's occurrence certain, God himself becomes the true author of sin. Edwards first notes that this difficulty, if it is one, equally afflicts Arminians who admit God's certain foreknowledge of all future sins (as most professing Christians must) — for foreordaining and foreknowing

an infallible outcome pose exactly parallel problems; the objection is therefore no valid reason to prefer Arminianism. Edwards then insists on a crucial distinction of terms: if "author of sin" means the sinner, the actual doer of wickedness, he utterly and emphatically denies this of God. But if it means the one who permits sin, without positively causing it, while ordering the surrounding circumstances toward wise and holy ends, then he does not deny that God is in this qualified sense the "orderer" of sin's occurrence — and this involves no reproach, since it is a holy act on God's part even though its object is evil. He marshals extensive scriptural evidence (Pharaoh's hardened heart, Joseph's brothers, the kings of Canaan, Nebuchadnezzar as God's "servant" of judgment, and above all the crucifixion of Christ) to show that Scripture itself repeatedly speaks of God ordaining sinful acts for good purposes without thereby becoming sin's author or agent. Edwards uses the analogy of the sun: its withdrawal is the "occasion" of darkness and cold, but no one concludes the sun itself must be dark or cold, since darkness follows only from its absence, not from any positive influence. Similarly, sin follows from God's withholding of his sustaining influence under certain circumstances, but is not a positive product of any evil quality in God's action. Edwards further argues that it belongs properly to the supreme, all-wise Governor of the universe to order even the moral events of the world by wisdom rather than leaving them to blind chance, and that this ordering — including the willing that the crucifixion, though most heinous in the murderers' own hearts, should occur for God's greater purposes — is itself the most holy of all divine volitions. He resolves the seeming inconsistency between God's "secret" and "revealed" will by noting these have different objects (the revealed will disapproves of sin as sin considered in itself; the secret will approves the very event, all its consequences considered) and are thus perfectly consistent rather than contradictory.

"If, by the author of sin, be meant the permitter... of sin, and, at the same time, a disposer of the state of events... such as that sin, if it be permitted... will most certainly and infallibly follow... I do not deny that God is the author of sin."

"As for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good" [Edwards quoting Genesis 50:20 regarding Joseph]."

Sect. X. Concerning sin's first entrance into the world

SUMMARY

Edwards briefly addresses the puzzle of how the very first sin could arise at all, if all volitions are necessarily determined by prior causes — since there was, by definition, no prior sinful disposition to necessitate the first sinful choice. He argues this difficulty is not unique or additional to his own scheme; the Arminian account fares no better and indeed cannot even coherently state a solution. To say the first sinful volition was determined by the will's own free, self-determining choice is simply to say it was caused by a prior sinful volition — but that is impossible, since it was the *first* sinful volition. To say it caused and determined itself is to say it existed before it existed, an outright contradiction. To say it arose by pure accident, without any cause, solves nothing about blame, since a purely accidental event, uncaused by the agent, would give no more basis for blaming the person than if it had been caused externally. Edwards compares such supposed "solutions" to a mathematician trying to resolve paradoxes about infinite

quantities by simply denying that a hundred times ten is more than one — a fake resolution that only papers over, rather than removes, the underlying difficulty. He suggests, though does not fully develop here, that sin's arising from the creature's own inherent imperfection (rather than any positive divine agency) is part of what makes it visibly not attributable to God as its source.

"It is an odd way of solving difficulties, to advance greater, in order to it. To say two and two make nine, or that a child begat his father, solves no difficulty."

"Nor will it go any further towards helping us over the difficulty, to say, the first sinful volition arose accidentally, without any cause at all."

Sect. XI. Of a supposed inconsistency of these principles with God's moral character

SUMMARY

Edwards reviews how his preceding arguments answer the broader charge that Calvinistic necessity undermines confidence in God's moral perfection — his justice, sincerity in his commands and invitations, and general goodness. He reiterates that the same difficulty (reconciling sincere divine invitations with certain foreknowledge of their rejection) besets Arminians who affirm God's foreknowledge, so it cannot be used as a special objection against Calvinism; Scripture itself shows God commanding Pharaoh to release Israel while declaring in advance that Pharaoh would refuse, and Christ warning Peter against denial while knowing with certainty that Peter would deny him. Edwards then turns the argument decisively against the Arminians: if genuine moral agency truly requires an *undetermined*, uncaused will, as they claim, then this applies to God too — meaning God's holy and just actions would not themselves be necessarily determined, and we would have no way of demonstrating with certainty that God will always act justly, since on their own theory nothing guarantees his choices are fixed one way rather than another. Ironically, then, it is the Arminian theory of freedom, not the Calvinist doctrine of necessity, that truly threatens confidence in God's unwavering moral character, since only a God whose nature necessarily and infallibly determines him toward what is good gives us secure grounds to trust he will always act rightly.

"How can we prove that God certainly will, in any one instance, do that which is just and holy, seeing his will is determined in the matter by no necessity?"

"We have no other way properly and truly to demonstrate the moral perfections of God, but... that God must necessarily perfectly know what is most worthy and valuable in itself... and so must necessarily will that which is best."

Sect. XII. Of a supposed tendency of these principles to atheism and licentiousness

SUMMARY

Edwards rebuts the charge that his necessitarian doctrine tends toward atheism or moral looseness. On atheism: he points out that the doctrine of a necessary connection between events and their causes is

actually the very foundation of the classic argument for God's existence from the created order (cf. Romans 1:20); it is instead the Arminian doctrine of uncaused contingency that undermines this proof, since it allows events to arise without dependence on anything prior, thereby removing the very principle by which the universe's dependence on a Creator is demonstrated. He also notes that the Stoics, associated with necessity, were among the most theistic of pagan philosophers, while Epicurus, the "father of atheism," was actually a champion of contingency and chance. On licentiousness: Edwards argues that it is really the Arminian scheme, not his own, that provides ready excuses for sin, since it treats strong natural inclinations toward evil as outside one's own self-determined will and therefore not properly blamable, effectively excusing wickedness in proportion to how deeply rooted and habitual it has become. He challenges his opponents with a pointed historical observation: if Calvinism truly saps the foundations of religion and virtue while the newer "rational" Arminian theology properly grounds and encourages them, it is strange indeed that, over the very period in which Arminian principles have gained ground and displaced Calvinism in the nation, vice, profaneness, and irreligion have visibly increased rather than receded.

"The doctrine of necessity, which supposes a necessary connexion of all events, on some antecedent ground and reason of their existence, is the only medium we have to prove the being of God."

"It is remarkable, that this happy remedy... against the pernicious effects of Calvinism... should, on so long a trial, be attended with no good effect; but that the consequence should be the reverse of amendment."

Sect. XIII. The objection that the reasoning by which the Calvinistic doctrine is supported is metaphysical and abstruse

SUMMARY

In this concluding section of Part IV, Edwards defends his method against the charge that his arguments are mere abstruse metaphysical sophistry, out of touch with plain common sense. He argues, first, that whether an argument happens to belong to the "science of metaphysics" is entirely irrelevant to whether it is sound — just as irrelevant as what language it happens to be written in. Nearly all the deepest and most certain truths of theology and philosophy (the immateriality of the soul, the unity and attributes of God, the impossibility of transubstantiation) can only be established by what would be called metaphysical reasoning; rejecting an argument merely by labeling it "metaphysical" settles nothing. Second, he insists that his own key premises are not obscure or abstruse at all, but simple and nearly self-evident once stated clearly: that nothing can be the cause of itself, that a first choice cannot be preceded by another choice that causes it, that no choice occurs during a state of perfect indifference, and that effects depend upon and are connected with their causes. Edwards challenges anyone who thinks his reasoning is mere "logomachy" (word-quibbling) to show precisely where the equivocation lies, offering to retract his arguments if such fallacy can be demonstrated. He returns once more to his central point about the nature of blame: our natural sense locates blameworthiness in the badness of the choice or disposition itself, not in some further inquiry into what caused that choice — we do not, in ordinary moral judgment, ask

whether a bad will itself arose from a prior bad will. He concludes that it is in fact the Arminians, not the Calvinists, who have introduced genuinely unintelligible, self-contradictory technical jargon — "self-determination," "sovereignty of the will," their peculiar senses of "necessity" and "contingency" — terms that, on inspection, correspond to no coherent idea at all, while his own arguments rest on the plain dictates of common sense.

"Natural sense does not place the moral evil of volitions and dispositions in the cause of them, but the nature of them."

"It is fact that they, and not we, have confounded things with metaphysical, unintelligible notions and phrases, and have drawn them from the light of plain truth into the gross darkness of abstruse metaphysical propositions."

The Conclusion

Edwards closes the whole treatise by anticipating that many readers, committed to the "rational and generous principles of modern fashionable divinity," will respond not with careful counter-argument but with indignation, mockery, and repetition of familiar epithets — "fatal," "irresistible," "Hobbes's necessity," "making men mere machines" — rather than genuine engagement with his reasoning. He asks only that the discourse be judged by calm, strict examination rather than by rhetorical scorn, noting pointedly that there is a real difference between refuting an argument and merely expressing contempt for it. Edwards then draws together the wider theological implications of his argument about free will. He shows how his doctrine, once established, resolves the entire family of disputes between Calvinists and Arminians: God's moral government of mankind — his commands, invitations, promises, and threatenings — is fully compatible with his all-determining providential ordering of every event, whether by direct action or by permission, since only moral (not natural) necessity is thereby implied, and moral necessity has been shown to be fully consistent with genuine moral agency. From this single foundation, Edwards argues, follow demonstrations of several classic Calvinist doctrines: total depravity and the sinner's inability to save himself (a moral, not natural, inability, which does not excuse); efficacious and "irresistible" grace (irresistible only in the sense of being attended by unfailing moral necessity, not violent compulsion); unconditional election (since if God's grace decisively determines who becomes a true saint, and none of God's designs are newly formed but are all eternal, then God's choice of particular persons for salvation must likewise be an eternal, absolute decree); a particular design in Christ's atonement for the elect specifically; and the perseverance of the saints (since if becoming a saint originally depends on God's determining grace rather than human self-determination, remaining a saint must depend on the same). Edwards then turns to a broader plea, asking readers to consider whether the great reformers and their heirs — dismissed by fashionable "free-thinking" contemporaries as bigoted, superstitious, and behind the times — have not in fact been treated with an unearned contempt, when it is really the newer Arminian principles that cannot be made consistent with common sense or with themselves. He closes by urging that if Scripture truly taught the opposite — that is, the Arminian doctrine of free will — this would pose a far graver difficulty for the credibility of Scripture than any of the "mysterious" Calvinistic doctrines his opponents find so objectionable; and that it is in fact a mark of Scripture's divine origin that it has taught, across ages of shifting fashion and philosophical opinion, doctrines that though frequently despised have never been genuinely refuted.

"It is easy to see how the decision of most of the points in controversy between Calvinists and Arminians depends on the determination of this grand article concerning the freedom of the will requisite to moral agency."

"There is a difference between argument and contempt; yea, and a difference between the contemptibleness of the person that argues, and the inconclusiveness of the arguments he offers."

"It is a glorious argument of the divinity of the holy Scriptures, that they teach such doctrines, which in one age and another, through the blindness of men... [have been despised, yet endure]."