

Adult Sunday School Class: Freedom of the Will

Yes, But ... It Doesn't Make Sense

Part IV. Wherein the chief Grounds of the Reasonings of Arminians, in Support and defense of Their Notions of Liberty, Moral Agency, etc. and against the Opposite Doctrine, Are Considered — Overview & Sections 1-4

3 August 2003

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*(Note: These notes are a lightly edited version of the notes that I used in teaching the class. The form is based on the style used by Winston Churchill for his speech notes.
The HTML version doesn't show indentation but the PDF does.
Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from
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Let's begin with prayer.

This is our eighth meeting;
I've grossly overplanned for today,
so we'll fly through our review,
in the vain hope of finishing all that I've planned.

Jonathan Edwards' book, *Freedom of the Will*,
is our subject of study.
Edwards (who was born in 1703 & died in 1758)
published the book
in 1754 when he was a missionary to Indians
in Stockbridge, Massachusetts.

So far, we've covered the preface, and parts I, II, and III;
in doing so
we've talked about such things as
when it is legitimate to use labels
in referring to others;
the definitions of terms such as
will,
determining the will,
and freedom;
and the characteristics
that Arminian theologians think
are essential to freedom.

We've also looked at Edwards' arguments
against each of these,
arguments by which Edwards demonstrates
that the traditional Arminian notions of free will
do not make sense.

Finally,
we've spent the past 2 weeks
looking at Edwards' arguments
showing that the Arminian notions
are not necessary to give meaning to
concepts such as
praise and blame, or
reward and punishment.

Some of you may recall
that part of your homework for the past 2 weeks
has been to ask other people (not from CRPC)
to give you a definition of free will.

Last week,
no one did the homework except for me;
this week was a bit better;
and next week will be better still —
if someone from outside my family will do it.
We won't have time to talk about the homework today, anyway,
so you have a bit of a reprieve.

We're ready now to move to Part IV,
the title of which is,
Wherein the chief Grounds
of the Reasonings of Arminians,
in Support and defense
of Their Notions of Liberty,
Moral Agency, etc.
and against the Opposite Doctrine,
Are Considered.

In this part,
Edwards presents many of the arguments
that Arminians use to support their views about the will,
and gives counter-arguments to them;
in doing this,
at times he repeats
some arguments he gave
earlier in Parts II & III.

We'll take 3 weeks to cover this part.

My original plan for today was to spend the whole class
covering sections 1-4
in much the same way that we've covered
most of the previous sections in the book;
that is by quoting to you various passages,
and talking at some length
about what these passages mean.

On further reflection,
however,
I decided that perhaps it would be better
to spend most of the time
giving an overview of the whole Part IV,
and also some time
discussing what you think are reasons
that Arminians give for their beliefs,
even if those reasons
aren't in Part IV.

Before we start on that,

let's review very quickly
some of the primary differences
between Calvinists and Arminians
concerning the will.

Would someone like to describe a main difference?

I think the first question on our little beliefs survey the first day
is a pretty good succinct summary of a main difference.

The two options for that question were:

- A. To be born again (regenerated), one must first have faith.
- &
- B. To have faith, one must first be born again (regenerated).

Option A describes (in part) the Arminian position,
while option B describes (in part) the Calvinist position.

Also, the third question on that survey was
another way to word the same distinction.

For that question, the two options were:

- A. Every person is able to accept or reject Christ.
- &
- B. Without God's direct intervention,
every person would certainly reject Christ.

Again for this one, A is an Arminian answer,
and B is a Calvinist answer.

What's the common distinction?

Whether someone is able, on his own,
to choose to believe on Christ,
that is, to will to believe on Christ.

Or to put it as I have on your handout:

Arminians think that everyone is able to believe on Christ,
although many choose not to believe.

Arminians insist that for everyone to be so able,
certain things must be true
of the freedom of man's will.

In parts II and III,

Edwards has tried to demonstrate
that these certain things (as he describes them)
do not have to be true,
and in fact cannot be true;
if you think he's been successful
in this demonstration,
then you may think there's no need for part IV.

In fact, if all we knew about the Arminian position
was what Edwards discussed in these parts of the book,

we might be at a loss to explain
why anyone who believe in this position.

That brings to mind Proverbs 18:17,
which says:

The first to plead his case seems just,
Until another comes and examines him.

That is,
if *all* you hear are the arguments in favor of one position,
you're very likely to believe the position is correct;
whereas if you *also* hear arguments
for other positions on the same subject
you may be less inclined to be quite
so certain about the correctness
of the original position.

In Part IV,
Edwards is going to try
to do justice to the Arminians' arguments
in favor of their position;
of course he's not going
to leave those arguments alone —
he will offer refutations of them, too.

As a bit of an aside,
when I taught a class last year about
A Christian Philosophy of Education,
one of the things we talked about
was how it is extremely difficult —
if not altogether impossible —
for someone to accurately
describe positions he does not hold.

Some people are better at it than others,
but almost no one can do it perfectly,
unless all that he does is
directly quote at length
from true proponents of the position,
and even that is subject
to unintentional bias in selecting who to quote
and what to quote.

As an example,
I remember a while back
reading a book against
the modern charismatic movement.
I thought it was quite good.
It had plenty of quotes
from charismatics,
along with refutations
of the arguments given in the quotes.

But when an ex-charismatic acquaintance of mine read it,

he thought it was an extremely shallow
and misleading treatment of the issue,
primarily because many of the quotes
were from people who were considered
non-orthodox or perhaps a tad crazy
even by people within the
charismatic movement.

One more aside,
and then we'll get back on track:
because of the things we've just talked about,
I think that debates ought to be used
far more often than they are
by the church today.
I don't think there is any better way
of getting to the real points of difference
on various issues.

Edwards, to his credit,
tries throughout *Freedom of the Will*
to do justice to the Arminian position,
by quoting, often at some length,
from Arminian writers.
Because of our limited time in the class,
I've not read many of those quotes to you,
but they are there.

In part IV Edwards enumerates 10 arguments
that Arminians advance to support their notion
of the freedom of the will
and to reject the Calvinistic notion —
at least there are 10 by my counting.

Before I read some quotes
from Edwards about these,
let's talk a bit about
what arguments you think are given
in favor of an Arminian freedom of the will.

Someone give me one —
try to keep it short,
and don't offer any commentary
or refutation,
and don't cheat by looking at your handout —
I'll write them on the board,
and we'll stop when we get to 10,
or no one can think of another one.

Let's look now at Edwards list;
now he doesn't give an actual list,
but I've culled this from throughout Part IV;
others might come up with a slightly different list.

Edwards begins section 1 like this:

ONE main foundation of the reasons,
which are brought to establish
the aforementioned notions of liberty, virtue, vice, etc.,
is a supposition,
that the virtuousness of the dispositions,
or acts of the will,
consists not in the nature of these dispositions or acts,
but wholly in the origin or cause of them.

So that if the disposition of the mind,
or acts of the will,
be never so good,
yet if the cause of the disposition or act
be not our virtue,
there is nothing virtuous or praiseworthy
in it.

On the contrary,
if the will, in its inclination or acts,
be never so bad,
yet unless it arises from something
that is our vice or fault,
there is nothing vicious or blameworthy in it.

Or to make it as short as possible:

1. Virtue and vice rest in the cause of acts of the will,
not in the nature of acts themselves.

Is this one on our list?

In section 2, Edwards discusses a second argument
by Arminians in support of their position.

He writes:

ONE thing, that is
made very much a ground of argument
and supposed demonstration by Arminians, ...
is their metaphysical notion of agency and action.

They say,
unless the soul has a self-determining power
it has no power of "action";
if its volitions be not caused by itself,
but are excited and determined by some extrinsic cause,
they can' be the soul's own "acts";
and that the soul can't be "active",
but must be wholly "passive",
in those effects,
which it is the subject of necessarily,
and not from its own free determination.

What's that mean?

Does it correspond to any from our list?

I'll summarize it like this:

2. Without self-determination the soul is entirely passive.

In section 3, Edwards gives another Arminian reason.

'Tis abundantly affirmed and urged by Arminian writers,
that it is contrary to common sense,
and the natural notions and apprehensions of mankind,
to suppose otherwise
than that necessity
(making no distinction between
natural and moral necessity)
is inconsistent with virtue and vice,
praise and blame,
reward and punishment.

This is quite simple to summarize:

3. Calvinist doctrine is contrary to common sense.

Is this one on our list?

Edwards talks about this in sections 3 and 4,
then in section 5,
he discusses a fourth Arminian reason;
the section beings like this:

ARMINIANS say,
if it be so,
that sin and virtue come to pass
by a necessity
consisting in a sure connection
of causes and effects,
antecedents and consequents.
It can never be worth the while
to use any means or endeavors to obtain the one,
and avoid the other;
seeing no endeavors can alter
the futurity of the event,
which is become necessary
by a connection already established.

What's this mean?

4. Without the Arminian notion of free will,
all striving is in vain.

Is this on our list?

This is closely connected to the fifth reason,
which Edwards discusses in Section 6.

WHEN Calvinists oppose
the Arminian notion of the freedom of will,
and contingence of volition ...

their opposers cry out of them,
as agreeing with the ancient Stoics
in their doctrine of fate,
and with Mr. Hobbes
in his opinion of necessity.

Or in only three words,

5. Calvinism is fatalistic.

Is this one on our list?

Perhaps we should start a game show
along the lines of Name That Tune,
except we'd call it,
Explain That Edwards.

I can explain that Edwards quote
in 5 words.

I can explain it in 4 words.

Explain that Edwards!

When you heard the quote I read,
did any of you think of the comic strip
Calvin and Hobbes?

The characters in the strip
were named after John Calvin
and Thomas Hobbes.

What work is Thomas Hobbes most know for?

Leviathan

What was the main point of the book?

Absolute monarchy is the best government,
because people are naturally wicked
and can not be trusted to govern themselves.

While we're talking about semi-famous people,
I'll note that reasons 4 & 5 could be combined into one,
which we could call
the Doris Day argument against Calvinism.

<< Pause for laughter, and then ask if anyone needs
an explanation: Que Sera, Sera, whatever will be will be >>

Let's move on now.

Edwards begins section 7 by describing
another argument used by some Arminians,

SOME may possibly object against
what has been supposed
of the absurdity and inconsistency
of a self-determining power in the will,
and the impossibility of its being otherwise
than that the will should be determined
in every case by some motive,
and by a motive which
(as it stands in the view of the understanding)
is of superior strength
to any appearing on the other side;
that if these things are true,
it will follow,
that not only the will of created minds,
but the will of God himself,
is necessary in all its determinations.

What's this argument?

6. The Calvinist notion of freedom binds God
just as much as it binds man.

Is this argument on our list?

Edwards devotes two full sections
to discussing and refuting this argument,
which means that the next new Arminian argument
that he presents is in section 9.

IT is urged by Arminians,
that the doctrine of the necessity of men's volitions,
or their necessary connection
with antecedent events and circumstances,
makes the First Cause,
and Supreme Orderer of all things,
the Author of Sin;
in that he has so constituted
the state and course of things,
that sinful volitions become necessary,
in consequence of his disposal.

That one is pretty easy to summarize:

7: Calvinism makes God the author of sin.

This argument is,
I think,
by far the most difficult one to refute;
I plan to spend a whole class on it
in two weeks.

Is it on our list?

In Section 11,

Edwards mentions another Arminian argument,
but this time he doesn't mention it right out
at the beginning of the section,
but rather midway through.

... the defenders of that notion of liberty
which I have opposed,
exclaim against the doctrine of Calvinists,
as tending to bring men into doubts
concerning the moral perfections of God ...

8. Calvinism casts doubts on God's morality.

Did we include this on our list?

The ninth Arminian argument,
according to my counting,
is given by Edwards in Section 12:

... it has often been said,
that the Calvinistic doctrine of necessity
saps the foundations of all religion and virtue,
and tends to
the greatest licentiousness of practice ...

Or, in other words,

9. Calvinism encourages sinful behavior.

Is this one on our list?

The 10th Arminian argument is given by Edwards in Section 13.

IT has often been objected against
the defenders of Calvinistic principles,
that in their reasonings,
they run into nice scholastic distinctions,
and abstruse metaphysical subtleties,
and set these in opposition to
common sense.

And 'tis possible,
that after the former manner,
it may be alleged against the reasoning
by which I have endeavored
to confute the Arminian scheme
of liberty and moral agency,
that it is very abstracted and metaphysical.

I'll summarize this one as follows:

10. The arguments for Calvinism are too abstract
and philosophical.

Is this on our list?

Is there anything on our list
that isn't mentioned by Edwards?

<< If there is, talk about it a bit. >>

That's an overview of Part IV.

In the short time that we have left, << if there is any time >>
let's talk a little bit about the 3 Arminian arguments
that Edwards presents and refutes
in the first 4 sections.

Recall that those arguments are

1. Virtue and vice rest in the cause of acts of the will,
not in the nature of acts themselves.
2. Without self-determination the soul is entirely passive.
3. Calvinist doctrine is contrary to common sense.

Edwards refutation of the 3rd argument
is basically a re-wording and amplification
of the arguments he gave in Part III
to show that moral necessity is
not inconsistent with either command
or blame or praise;
so I'm not going to say anything more about it.

Concerning the first argument,
Edwards writes, among many other thing:

'Tis agreeable to the natural notions of mankind,
that moral evil,
with its desert of dislike and abhorrence,
and all its other ill-deservings,
consists in a certain *deformity*
in the *nature* of certain dispositions
of the heart
and acts of the will;
and not in the deformity of *something else*,
diverse from the very thing itself;
which deserves abhorrence,
supposed to be the cause of it.

Which would be absurd,
because that would be to suppose,
a thing that is innocent and not evil,
is truly evil and faulty,
because another thing is evil.

It implies a contradiction;
for it would be to suppose,
the very thing which is morally evil and blameworthy,
is innocent and not blameworthy;
but that something else,

which is its cause,
is only to blame.
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.

In this section,
Edwards also gives an important insight
into why some people think in these terms,
which he has shown are nonsensical.

I suppose,
the way that men came to entertain
this absurd inconsistent notion,
with respect to internal inclinations and volitions
themselves (or notions that imply it) ...
was,
that it is indeed
a very plain dictate of common sense, t
hat it is so
with respect to all
outward actions and
sensible motions of the body;
that the moral good or evil of them
does not lie at all in the motions themselves,
which, taken by themselves,
are nothing of a moral nature;
and the essence of all the moral good or evil
that concerns them
lies in those internal dispositions and volitions,
which are the cause of them.

Now, being always used to determine this,
without hesitation or dispute,
concerning external actions,
which are the things that,
in the common use of language,
are signified by such phrases as
men's "actions", or their "doings";
hence, when they came to speak of volitions,
and *internal exercises* of their inclinations,
under the same denomination of their "actions",
or what they "do",
they unwarily determined the case
must also be the same with these
as with external actions,
not considering the vast difference
in the nature of the case.

In other words,
not being careful in our language
can get us into trouble,
because we can confuse

the external results of our choices
with the choices themselves.

He continues this theme
in section 2 in his discussion of the Arminian argument
that without self-determination
the soul must be entirely passive.

The thing which has led men into
this inconsistent notion of action,
when applied to volition,
as though it were essential to this internal action,
that the agent should be self-determined in it,
and that the will should be the cause of it,
is probably this, —
that, according to the sense of mankind,
and the common use of language,
it is so,
with respect to men's external actions,
which are what originally,
and according to the vulgar use
and most proper sense of the word,
are called "actions".

Men in these,
are self-directed,
self-determined and,
their wills are the cause
of the motions of their bodies,
and the external things that are done.

So that unless men do them voluntarily,
and of choice,
and the action be determined
by their antecedent volition,
it is no action or doing of theirs.

Hence some metaphysicians have been led unwarily,
but exceeding absurdly,
to suppose the same concerning volition itself,
that [it] also must be determined by the will;
which is to be determined by antecedent volition,
as the motion of the body is;
not considering the contradiction it implies.

But it is very evident,
that in the metaphysical distinction
between action and passion
(though long since become common
and the general vogue),
due care has not been taken to conform language
to the nature of things,
or to any distinct,
clear ideas; —
as it is in innumerable other philosophical,
metaphysical terms,
used in these disputes;
which has occasioned inexpressible difficulty,

contention, error, and confusion.
Thus, probably,
it came to be thought
that necessity was inconsistent with action,
as these terms are applied to volition.
First, these terms,
action and necessity,
are changed from their original meaning,
as signifying external voluntary action and constraint
(in which meaning they are
evidently inconsistent),
to signify quite other things,
viz. volition itself, and certainty of existence.
And when the change of signification is made,
care is not taken to make
proper allowances and abatements
for the difference of sense;
but still the same things
are unwarily attributed to
action and necessity,
in the new meaning of the words,
which plainly belonged to them in their first sense;
and, on this ground,
maxims are established
without any real foundation,
as though they were
the most certain truths,
and the most evident dictates of reason.

For next week,
read sections 5-8 if you can,
and continue reading Romans 8-12;
also, if you've not already done so,
ask some people to define "free will",
and send me the answers.

We'll spend most of the time next week
talking about the Arminian arguments that
Without the Arminian notion of free will,
all striving is in vain,
and
Calvinism is fatalistic.