

Adult Sunday School Class: Freedom of the Will

Yes, But ... Why Should I Try?

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 — Sections 5-8

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by C. Michael Holloway

*(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.
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Let's begin with prayer.

This is our ninth meeting;
we have only two more to go after this one.

Let's quickly review our previous eight meetings.

We're studying a book by Jonathan Edwards,
which is usually called *Freedom of the Will*,
although its full title is quite a bit longer.
Edwards published this book
in 1754 when he was a missionary to Indians
in Stockbridge, Massachusetts.

We've learned that in the book Edwards
defined the will as
the mind choosing;
said that
the will is determined by
the motive
that is
strongest
to the mind;
and defined freedom as
the opportunity to do what you will.

We have also learned that some people,
who historically have often been called, "Arminians,"
believe that this definition for freedom
is incomplete,
because it leaves out three components
they believe are essential to freedom:
namely
self-determination,
indifference,
and contingency.

We've studied Edwards' arguments
showing that none of these three
are actually essential components.

We've also studied Edwards' arguments

that show that the Arminian notions
are not necessary to give meaning to
concepts such as
praise and blame, or
reward and punishment.

Last week we gave an overview of Part IV
of Jonathan Edwards' *Freedom of the Will*.

What is Edwards' main purpose in this part?

To give refutations to the Arminians'
chief arguments in favor of their view of the will.

Edwards discusses ten of those arguments in detail:

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.
4. Without the Arminian notion of free will, all striving is in vain.
5. Calvinism is fatalistic.
6. The Calvinist notion of freedom binds God
just as much as it binds man.
7. Calvinism makes God the author of sin.
8. Calvinism casts doubts on God's morality.
9. Calvinism encourages sinful behavior.
10. The arguments for Calvinism are
too abstract and philosophical.

Last week, we also briefly talked about
Edwards' refutation of the first 3 of these arguments.

Are there any questions about this?

Perhaps you'll also recall from last week
that I said I expected someone from outside my family
to do the homework
about asking for definitions for free will.

I am happy to report that this expectation was met,
and here are some of the results:

"The ability to choose one's own destiny;
God doesn't choose your destiny for you."

"Doing what you want
without hurting anyone else."

“We have it and we don't.
Man can choose to obey God,
but man can also be outside the plan of God.”

“We are able to choose
the actions we make
but the end result isn't necessarily
determined by us.”

“The ability to choose without coercion.”

“Ability to make decisions on our own.
The Lord gave us the ability to come or not to come to Him.
Out of love we come to Him.”

Our main subject today will be the two arguments
that I referred to last week as the Doris Day,
or Que Sera Sera, arguments, that is,
Without the Arminian notion of free will,
all striving is in vain, and
Calvinism is fatalistic.

Because argument nine
(Calvinism encourages sinful behavior)
is so closely related to these,
we'll also include it in our discussion.

I'll quote to you Edwards' brief description
of each of these three arguments,
and then we'll talk about them
to be sure we understand
what the arguments are;
after that,
we'll discuss refutations.

Here's how Edwards describes
the “striving is vain” argument:

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.

His description of the “fatalism” argument begins like this:

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

Finally, the “Calvinism encourages sin” argument
is described by Edwards like this:

... 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 ...

Although I've listed these as three separate arguments,
and although Edwards talks about them in separate sections,
there's a sense in which these are
really just variations on a single argument,
an argument that is founded on the idea
that Calvinism makes
human choices irrelevant.

Before we talk about this in more detail,
let's take a brief detour,
because there are really two separate aspects
to the argument that I've called
the fatalism argument —
there's the aspect of fatalism,
and there's also the aspect
of agreement with ideas of bad people.

There's a difference between these two:
“Calvinism is wrong because it is fatalistic,”
and
“Calvinism is wrong because it agrees with Hobbes,
who happens to be fatalistic.”

What's the difference?

One concentrates on ideas,
while the other concentrates on people.

The first of these fits in with the other two arguments
we'll consider,
while the second needs to be addressed separately.

Edwards addresses it quite well in this excerpt,
which although it talks specifically
about one person (Hobbes),
easily generalizes to any “bad” person:

As to Mr. Hobbes's maintaining
the same doctrine concerning necessity;
I confess it happens I never read Mr. Hobbes.
Let his opinion be what it will,
we need not reject all truth
which is demonstrated by clear evidence,
merely because it was once held
by some had man.

This great truth,
that Jesus is the Son of God,
was not spoiled
because it was once and again
proclaimed with a loud voice by the devil.

If truth is so defiled,
because it is spoken by the mouth,
or written by the pen,
of some ill-minded mischievous man,
that it must never be received,
[as] we shall never know
when we hold any of the most precious
and evident truths by a sure tenure.

And if Mr. Hobbes has
made a bad use of this truth,
that is to be lamented.
But the truth is not to be
thought worthy of rejection on that account.

It is common for
the corruption of the hearts of evil men
to abuse the best things to vile purposes.

Does everyone understand this?

Just because some bad person believes something
doesn't mean that thing is wrong.

With that out of the way,
let's return to talking about how
the three separate arguments
can be combined into one basic one.

An anti-Calvinist may say,
"if it is true
that the future is already determined,
then there's nothing that I can do
to change the future,
and so it doesn't matter at all
what I do.

My choices just don't mean anything.
Whether I obey God,
or obey my sinful desires,
doesn't matter:
the future will turn out the same anyway.

Whatever will be,
will be,

independent of me,
Que sera, sera.”

So, the anti-Calvinist would say,
Calvinism implies there's no need
to strive to obey God.
If I'm destined to obey, then I will obey;
if I'm destined to disobey, then I will disobey.

Likewise,
there's no need to strive to avoid sin.
If I'm destined to be a murderer,
or an adulterer,
or a gossip,
then that's what will I be;
and whatever sins I'm destined to avoid,
those sins,
and those sins alone,
I will avoid.
Effort on my part isn't needed.

That's the gist of the “que sera sera” argument.

Are there any questions or comments;
does everyone understand this argument?

Let's talk some now about refuting this argument.

For purposes of illustration,
suppose we have two people,
Arnie & Cal;
as you might suspect,
Arnie is an Arminian,
and Cal is a Calvinist.

Let's now suppose that Arnie
has just made an argument to Cal
of the sort we just discussed.

How might Cal respond?

Well, one thing Cal might say is this:
“Well, Arnie,
I don't believe people shouldn't try to obey God,
nor does any Calvinist I know believe that.
You've just created a strawman,
claiming that we believe things we don't.”

Is this a good reply by Arnie?

No, it's not a very good reply —
why isn't it very good?

Arnie could simply reply:

“Cal, you misunderstand me.
I didn’t say you believed those things —
I know you don’t —
all I said was that
you *ought* to believe these things,
if you want to be consistent with
your stated position on the will.
The good and necessary consequence
of the Calvinist position is that
striving is futile.
Your position is inconsistent.
I’m glad you’re inconsistent on this,
because it makes you a much better
Christian that you ought to be,
but nevertheless,
you, and all Calvinists,
are inconsistent.
You should believe that
you can do whatever you like,
because your destiny
is already sealed.”

Does everyone understand this reply from Arnie?

Let’s suppose Cal replies like this:
“No, Arnie, you’re wrong.
Calvinists *ought not* believe what
you say we should believe.
The Bible teaches we should
strive to obey God;
that’s what we ought to believe —
what the Bible teaches.”

Is this a good reply from Cal?

No, it’s not very good either,
because he’s missed the point.
Arnie could answer like this:

“Cal, Cal, Cal,
you still don’t understand.
I know you believe the Bible teaches
we should strive to obey God,
and I believe it, too;
there’s no difference there.
The difference between us is
that my view about man’s will is
consistent with this Biblical teaching,
and your view is not.”

Suppose Cal then replies:

“Arnie,
the Bible teaches Calvinism, too,

so there's no inconsistency.
The Bible teaches that what we do matters,
and the Bible also teaches Calvinism.
My views are not inconsistent
with the Bible."

Is this a good reply?

Nope, poor Cal isn't doing very well.

Arnie could reply quite simply:

"Then, according to your views,
the Bible itself must be inconsistent,
since it teaches as true
two positions that are contradictory
to each other."

Suppose Cal replied to this by saying,
"Arnie, the Bible never contradicts itself;
you know that."

How might Arnie respond?

"Then you must give up your Calvinism,
because you've already said
that the Bible clearly teaches
that what people do matters.
Calvinism is inconsistent with that,
so the Bible can't teach it."

What should Cal do at this point?

He should do what he should've done at first,
and address the real issue,
which is whether
Calvinism is inconsistent with striving,
and in doing so,
he should call on his friend,
Jonathan,
to help.

If he did this,
then he might say something like this,
"You say that Calvinism is
inconsistent with striving to obey God,
because it makes such striving to be in vain.

For endeavors to be in vain
is for them not to be successful, ...
which cannot be but in one of these two ways.

First,
that although the means are used,
yet the event aimed at does not follow.

Secondly,
if the event does follow,

it is not because of the means
 or from any connection or dependence
 of the event on the means:
 the event would have come to pass
 as well without the means as with them.

If either of these two things is the case,
 then the means are not properly successful,
 and are truly in vain.

The successfulness
 or unsuccessfulness of means,
 in order to an effect,
 or their being in vain or not in vain,
 consists in those means being
 connected or not connected with the effect,
 in such a manner as this,
 viz. that the effect is with the means,
 and not without them;

or, that the being of the effect is,
 on the one hand,
 connected with means,
 and the want of the effect,
 on the other hand,
 is connected with the want of the means.

If there be such a connection,
 as this between means and end,
 the means are not in vain;
 the more there is of such a connection,
 the further they are from being in vain;
 and the less of such a connection,
 the more they are in vain.

Now, therefore, the question to be answered
 (in order to determine,
 whether it follows from this doctrine
 of the necessary connection
 between foregoing things and consequent ones,
 that means used in order to any effect
 are more in vain
 than they would be otherwise),

is, whether it follows from it
 that there is less of
 the aforementioned connection
 between means and effect;
 that is, whether,
 on the supposition of there being
 a real and true connection
 between means and effect,
 than on the supposition
 of there being no fixed connection
 between antecedent things
 and consequent ones;
 and the very stating of this question
 is sufficient to answer it.

It must appear to everyone that will open his eyes,
 that this question cannot be affirmed

without the grossest absurdity and inconsistency.
 Means are foregoing things,
 and effects are following things.
 And if there were no connection
 between foregoing things and following ones,
 there could be no connection
 between means and end;
 and so all means would be wholly vain and fruitless.
 For it is by virtue of some connection only,
 that they become successful.
 It is some connection observed or revealed,
 or otherwise known,
 between antecedent things and following ones,
 that is what directs in the choice of means.
 And if there were no such thing
 as an established connection,
 there could be no choice as to means;
 one thing would have no more tendency
 to an effect than another;
 there would be no such thing
 as tendency in the case.
 All those things,
 which are successful means of other things,
 do therein prove connected antecedents of them.
 Therefore, to assert that a fixed connection
 between antecedents and consequents
 makes means vain and useless,
 or stands in the way to hinder
 the connection between means and end,
 is just as ridiculous as to say,
 that a connection between antecedents and consequents
 stands in the way
 to hinder a connection
 between antecedents and consequents.
 Nor can any supposed connection
 of the succession or train
 of antecedents and consequents,
 from the very beginning of all things,
 the connection being made
 already sure and necessary,
 either by established laws of nature,
 or by these together
 with a decree of sovereign immediate
 interpositions of divine power,
 on such and such occasions,
 or any other way (if any other there be).
 I say,
 no such necessary connection
 of a series of antecedents and consequents
 can in the least tend to hinder,
 but that the means we use
 may belong to the series;
 and so may be some of those antecedents
 which are connected with the consequents

we aim at in the established course of things.
Endeavors which we use,
are things that exist;
and therefore they belong
to the general chain of events;
all the parts of which chain
are supposed to be connected;
and so endeavors are supposed to be connected
with some effects,
or some consequent things or other.
And certainly this does not hinder
but that the events they are connected with,
may be those which we aim at,
and which we choose,
because we judge them
most likely to have a connection
with those events from the established order
and course of things which we observe,
or from something in divine revelation.

What's all this mean?

To put it simply,
without distorting it too much,
it means that necessary connection
does not eliminate means,
rather it establishes means as effective.

How might Arnie reply to this?

He might say something like this:

“You’re missing the point.
I’m not claiming that there’s no connection
between means and ends.
What I’m claiming is that,
according to your Calvinist beliefs,
there’s nothing that you
can do to change the future,
so there’s no reason for you to try.”

Cal, with Jonathan’s help,
could reply this as follows:

You believe that ... an invariable necessity
of all things already settled,
must render the interposition of all means,
endeavors, conclusions, or actions of ours,
in order to the obtaining
any future end whatsoever,
perfectly insignificant;
because they cannot in the least
alter or vary the course and series of things,
in any event or circumstance;

all being already fixed unutterably by necessity.
 And that therefore it is folly
 for men to use any means for any end;
 but their wisdom to save themselves
 the trouble of endeavors,
 and take their ease.
 No person can draw such all inference from this doctrine,
 and come to such a conclusion,
 without contradicting himself,
 and going counter to the very principles
 he pretends to act upon.
 For he comes to a conclusion and takes a course,
 in order to an end,
 even his ease,
 or the saving himself from trouble
 he seeks something future,
 and uses means in order to a future thing.
 Even in his drawing up that conclusion,
 that he will seek nothing
 and use no means in order to anything in future.
 He seeks his future ease,
 and the benefit and comfort of indolence.
 If prior necessity,
 that determines all things,
 makes vain,
 all actions or conclusions of ours,
 in order to anything future;
 then it makes vain
 all conclusions and conduct of ours,
 in order to our future ease.
 The measure of our ease,
 with the time, manner, and every circumstance of it,
 is already fixed,
 by all-determining necessity,
 as much as anything else.
 If he says within himself,
 “What future happiness or misery I shall have,
 is already, in effect,
 determined by the necessary
 course and connection of things;
 therefore, I will save myself the trouble
 of labor and diligence
 which cannot add
 to my determined degree of happiness,
 or diminish my misery;
 but will take my ease,
 and will enjoy the comfort of
 sloth and negligence.”
 Such a man contradicts himself.
 He says,
 the measure of his future happiness and misery
 is already fixed,
 and he will not try to diminish the one,
 nor add to the other;

but yet, in his very conclusion,
he contradicts this.
He takes up this conclusion,
to add to his future happiness,
by the ease and comfort
of his negligence,
and to diminish his future trouble and misery
by saving himself the trouble
of using means and taking pains.

What's this mean?

Basically it means
that it is impossible to act in a way
that is consistent with the belief
that your actions do not matter.

Has this refuted the argument?

Yes, but perhaps not in a way that is satisfactory to everyone.

The difficulty for many lies,
I think,
in not being able to distinguish
between God's perspective of time
and our perspective of time.

In our perspective of time,
the future is uncertain,
but in God's perspective,
the future is absolutely fixed,
because there is no future,
every time is eternally present.

Perhaps the closest way
that we can gain some insight
into the proper perspective
is by considering the past.

Here's an example,
last week I participated
in, among, other things,
a panel discussion
about accident analysis at
the International System Safety Conference
in Ottawa.

Had I not gone to Ottawa,
I would not have been on the panel,
would I?

Would I have been on the panel
without effort on my part?
No.

Would it have made any sense last Sunday for me to have said something like this,
 “It doesn’t matter whether I go to the airport or not,
 because God has already determined
 whether I’ll be on the panel or not.” ?

Of course not.

Nor does it make sense
 to make analogous statements
 about things in the future.

From God’s perspective,
 the future is just as certain as the past,
 and just as we don’t claim
 that our past decisions didn’t have an effect,
 nor can we claim that our future decisions
 won’t have an effect.

In both cases,
 the relationship between
 the decision and the effect
 is entirely fixed and certain,
 but in neither case
 does this make the decision
 irrelevant to the effect.

Does that make sense?

Your homework for next week
 is to read the rest of Part IV,
 continue reading Romans 8-11,
 and ask folks to discuss “free will” with you.