

An introduction to Edward's Freedom of the Will.

Before 1700, the religion of America was Calvinism. But by the 1740's the first wave of the Enlightenment, Deism, and Liberal theology had come to New England. Although they were not all these men were followers of Arminius, the supporters of this new movement became known as "Arminians". Among these men, it had become fashionable to ridicule Calvinism. They viewed Calvinism as a backward system of religion, full of contradictions and absurdities. In a series of popular books, these "Arminians" argued that if Calvinism is true then men are robots, moral responsibility is an illusion, fatalism is the true philosophy, and God is the author of sin.

Jonathan Edwards read all this with a great deal of concern. As far as he could tell, the Arminians were using empty rhetoric and loud condemnations of Calvinism to persuade their followers. They had no calm, carefully stated arguments. There was no foundation for their claims. They were confident, but they were confidently mistaken. In reply, Edwards' wrote three major books. The first, and the most famous, was "The Freedom of the Will". In this book, Edwards argues that it is not Calvinism, but Arminianism that is full of absurdities and contradictions.

"The Freedom of the Will" is a wonderful book. The depth of the thought and the clarity of expression are amazing. It is the best book on the freedom of the will ever written. Even today, two hundred and fifty years later, philosophers who discuss free will must read it. Paul Ramsey wrote the introduction to the Yale University edition. In this introduction he writes,

This book alone is enough to"

Yale University spends millions of dollars a year on an Edwards research center. (You can visit them on the web at Edwards.Yale.edu.) This center has already published a 25 volume edition of Edwards' works. And it was all inspired by this book. From his death in 1758 until about 1950 it was common to hear ignorant scholars belittling Edwards. But all that has now changed. He is now the most researched figure in early American history.

Unfortunately, if you are not a philosopher, it is not an easy book to understand. It was not written for layman. It was written for the scholarly world. It was written to philosophers. But in any case, it is not easy for non-philosophers to understand. I know. I just finished teaching a two week mini-course on the Book. Half of the time half the students were staring at me. I could see they were asking in their hearts, "What is this teacher talking about?" The homework assignment was to translate the first section into Chinese. It wasn't easy. But the class did a great job. In this school newsletter, we feature their translation. As far as I know, it is the first translation of the entire first section. It is not yet ready for publication. But even without a final editing, I think you will agree that they did a great job.

Let me close with a brief introduction to what the book is all about. It will give you a flavor of what

Edwards is talking about. To fully understand, I'm afraid you will need to begin taking courses at CRTS! Anyway, here we go.

We can put the basic Arminian claim in two different ways:

(1) Free choices have no causes other than the choices themselves. In the Arminian terminology, our free will is "self-determined".

(2) If a choice has a cause other than the choice itself, it is not free. In the Arminian terminology, supposing that our choices do have causes other than themselves implies that we are not morally responsible, men are robots, God is the author of sin, etc.

Edwards has three replies. The first is that the Arminians are confusing physical causes with motivational causes. Let me give an example. Suppose I am scheduled to preach in Kaoshiong on Sunday. So, I buy a ticket for a 7:00 A.M. high speed train from Taipei to Kaoshiong. Unfortunately, there is a major Typhoon on Saturday night and all trains and planes are cancelled. So I do not go to preach. I am not morally blameworthy because there was a physical cause of my not going. But, suppose there is no Typhoon. Rather, I don't go because I decided to watch a football game instead! In this case, Edwards notes, in the technical sense of "cause", there is a cause for my choice. Roughly, my desire to watch the football game was the cause. More precisely, we can say this. At the very point of making the choice, my desire to watch the football game was stronger than my desire to go to preach. And there is a general rule (it is the way we are made) that at the point of choice, the strongest inclination determines the choice. And this is a "cause" in a technical sense. And so the Arminian is mistaken. My motivation is not a choice, the choice was free in the ordinary sense of "free", and I am blameworthy for not going. This shows that both points (1) and (2) given above are mistaken.

Edwards second reply is directed at point (1). He argues that it is absurd. The only way the will can determine a choice is by a choice. And so for the will to determine any given choice, there must be a second choice that determines that (first) choice. But then by the same reason, if the will determines the second choice, there must be a third choice that determines the second choice. And then there must be the fourth choice ... Clearly this is impossible. In a cute phrase, Edwards tells us, this will "run freedom right out of the world". The problem, according to Edwards is that the Arminians were confusing outward actions and choices. Take my above example. My choice not to go to Kaoshiong determined my action of not going. All agree to this. The question is, "What determined my choice not to go?". The Calvinist says it was my motivation together with the way I am made. But the Arminian says, "No, it was my will alone". But, Edwards notes, if there is any sense to this, it must mean that I made a choice to make this choice not to go. And the infinite regress begins.

The third reply, and the most important, is that the Arminian puts too much emphasis on the will and not enough on the nature or the heart. Edwards argues that virtue is first in the heart and then in the choices. A good tree produces good fruit; and a bad tree produces bad fruit. The nature of

the tree determines the choice. Jesus Christ made perfect choices because he was a perfect tree. People make evil choices because of their evil nature. This is biblical and it is also common sense. Arminianism are implicitly denying this. For Arminians, virtue does not lie first in the heart or nature. Virtue lies first in the will. For our wills to be free, they say, our wills must be free to choose against our own nature and inclinations. But, Edwards argues, this also leads to a collection of non-sense. Desires certainly do influence our choices, and in that sense are involved in determining the will. The greedy man is more likely to steal than one who is not. No one can deny this. And so, for the will to be perfectly free in the Arminian sense, we would need to have no desires at all. But this is non-sense. This, and not Calvinism, would make us into robots.

Edwards considers a wide variety of Arminian replies to his arguments. To discuss them is beyond the scope of this introduction. For those with deeper interest, a good starting place (in English) is the introduction to the Yale edition of the Freedom of will. You can also watch my mini-course on our website (www.crtslive.net).