

# Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will* (1754)

## Contextual Benchmarks

### I. JE's Protagonists

#### A. Thomas Chubb (1679–1747)

- a tallow chandler and glove maker;
- started out an Arian and wound up a Deist;
- wrote many tracts, several of which concerned JE (*A Collection of Tracts on Various Subjects* [1730]);
- in JE's mind there is a slippery slope from Arminianism to Chubb's Deism, in that the Arminian insistence on human moral autonomy undermines not only predestination but providence as well, disconnecting God from human history

#### B. Daniel Whitby (1638–1726)

- an Arminian Anglican clergyman;
- wound up with Arian and Unitarian tendencies;
- his *Discourse on the Five Points* (1710) is the work that primarily concerned JE

#### C. Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

- a dissenting (Independent) minister in London and great hymn writer;
- actually something of a hesitant Calvinist;
- after his death he was claimed by liberals to have had Arian tendencies (in 1719 he opposed an effort to require an orthodox formulation of the Trinity among dissenting ministers), but such claims by English liberals were hotly contested by the orthodox;
- Watts was just not consistent enough on the will for JE;
- he is not referred to by name in JE's treatise, but only as "the author of *An Essay on Freedom of Will in God and the Creature*" (1732)

### II. Background to the "Natural" and "Moral" Ability Distinction

#### A. St. Augustine's Writings against the Pelagians

- since the Fall all have sinned by a kind of natural necessity;
- but this necessity is imposed internally (by improper willing that has acquired the force of habit and thus become "second nature") rather than externally;
- moreover, divine grace operates in our lives in a manner that is congruous with our wills;
- God is not coercive, but operates morally, leading us by the heartstrings;
- God causes in us a victorious delight (*delectatio victrix*) in the good
- see *On Man's Perfection in Righteousness*, 4.9; *On Nature and Grace*, 66.79; *Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel According to St. John*, 26.1-4

## **B. Calvin's Distinction between Compulsion and Necessity**

- Calvin taught that “man, while he sins of necessity, yet sins no less voluntarily”;
- unregenerate individuals have a “necessary tendency to sin” that derives from “the defects that have entered our nature”
- after the Fall, “all parts of the soul were possessed by sin,” indeed “the whole man is overwhelmed—as by a deluge—from head to foot, so that no part is immune from sin and all that proceeds from him is to be imputed to sin”
- but while Calvin clearly did not maintain a doctrine of natural ability, the evangelistic purpose of JE’s doctrine accords with Calvin’s suggestion that “when man has been taught that no good thing remains in his power, and that he is hedged about on all sides by most miserable necessity, in spite of this he should nevertheless be instructed to aspire to a good of which he is empty, to a freedom of which he has been deprived. In fact, he may thus be more sharply aroused from inactivity than if it were supposed that he was endowed with the highest virtues”
- see Calvin’s *Institutes*, 2.3.5; 2.4.1; 2.1.9–11; and 2.2.1

## **C. The *De Auxiliis* Controversy**

- Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621), especially, helps to mediate the post-Tridentine debates within the Roman Catholic Church (mainly between Dominicans like Domingo Banez and Jesuit followers of Luis Molina) over the nature of efficacious grace
- he admits with the Dominicans that grace operates prior to the movement of the human will, eliciting the desired response infallibly;
- but he denies the Dominican claim that God’s grace operates after the manner of a “physical premotion,” agreeing instead with the Jesuits that grace elicits its response morally, not physically—thus Bellarmine (and the Spanish Jesuit Francisco Suarez) confirms and extends the now-traditional Catholic distinction between the physical and moral operations of grace

## **D. The Academy of Saumur and “Amyraldianism”**

1. John Cameron (c. 1579–1625)
  - a Scottish theologian who lived in France for most of the period 1600–1625, was appointed professor of divinity at the French Reformed Saumur Academy in 1618, and set in motion a school of Reformed thought there that would prove controversial throughout the remainder of the century
  - the distinction between natural and moral ability was placed on the theological map by this school
2. Moïse Amyraut (1596–1664)
  - appointed professor of divinity at Saumur in 1626 (succeeding Cameron)
  - best known for his support of “hypothetical universalism”
3. Josue de la Place (1596–1665)
  - best known for his defense of the “mediate imputation” of Adam’s sin to his posterity
4. Louis Cappel (1585–1658)
  - denied the inspiration and Mosaic authorship of the Hebrew vowel points

5. Formula Consensus Helvetica, or Helvetic Formula Consensus of 1675

- Canons 21–22 formally condemn the natural/moral ability distinction

**III. The Arminian Appropriation of the Molinist Doctrine of “Middle Knowledge”**

- in predestining some for salvation, God elects on the basis of his foreknowledge of free human responses to the gospel
- in this Molinist/Arminian doctrine of predestination, there is a logical movement toward the decrees from God’s absolute or simple knowledge (*scientia necessaria* or *scientia simplicis*) of pure possibility, or all that which is possible in Him → to God’s “middle knowledge” (*scientia media*) of “futuribles,” or all that would come to pass under certain, divinely established conditions *ad extra* → to God’s free knowledge of the definite futures affected by His own will *ad extra* (*scientia voluntaria* or *scientia libera*)
  - thus God elects some for salvation from fallen humanity before the foundation of the world, but does so in a way that is mediated by, or conditioned by, His foreknowledge of their genuinely free responses to the gospel—and for the Molinists and Arminians, this is a way to maintain a commitment to predestination while also affirming human free will and a significant role for human beings in their salvation

## **STUDY GUIDE TO JONATHAN EDWARDS'S *FREEDOM OF THE WILL* (1754)**

(N.B. All page references on this guide refer to vol. 1 of the Yale Ed. of *The Works of JE*)

1. Study the basic summary of JE's treatise provided on the reverse side of this handout.

2. Jot down JE's definitions of the following three key terms:

the will (see esp. p. 137):

"liberty" or freedom of the will (see esp. p. 163):

Arminian (see esp. p. 129 ff.):

3. Identify and explain what JE refers to (on pp. 164–65) as the three main features of an "Arminian" notion of liberty. Why and how does JE criticize these three "Arminian" features? (Hint: Part Two of JE's treatise is devoted to an assessment of them.)

4. Summarize JE's distinction between "natural" and "moral" necessity and/or "natural" and "moral" ability (see esp. pp. 156–62).

5. In JE's view, how might this treatise be used in defense of Dordtian Calvinism (see esp. pp. 430–39)?

6. Offer a brief summary, in your own words, of the main argument of this treatise.

## A VERY BASIC SUMMARY OF THE MAIN POINTS OF JE'S ARGUMENT IN *FREEDOM OF THE WILL* (1754)

The will is not an independent faculty, but is integrally related to the rest of one's soul, particularly the understanding and the affections

- the actions of the will take their rise from the affections, or the inclinations of the soul
  - as finite moral agents, we all have a limited horizon of moral possibilities, and thus a determinate affectional orientation
  - as fallen sinners, "natural men" have disoriented affections—they no longer want what is right, and so sin by moral necessity
    - but they do not sin by natural necessity—no one is coercing them to sin—they do so willingly
    - thus it is true to say both that they are in bondage to sin, and that they retain a certain freedom, or natural ability, to avoid sin and respond to God's call of salvation
      - all of us, regenerate and unregenerate alike, always get what we want—"the will always is as the greatest apparent good is" (p. 142)
      - thus moral necessity and freedom of will are fully compatible

### Definition of Terms

**the will** = "that by which the mind chooses anything" (p. 137)

**philosophical necessity** = "the full and fixed connection between the things signified by the subject and predicate of a proposition, which affirms something to be true" (p. 152)

**moral necessity** = "that necessity of connection and consequence, which arises from . . . *moral causes*, as the strength of inclination, or motives, and the connection which there is in many cases between these, and such certain volitions and actions" (p. 156)

**natural necessity** = "such necessity as men are under through the force of natural causes; as distinguished from what are called moral causes, such as habits and dispositions of the heart, and moral motives and inducements" (pp. 156–57)