

## **Freedom of the Will**

**Jonathan Edwards**

### **Part I.**

#### **HEREIN ARE EXPLAINED AND STATED VARIOUS TERMS AND THINGS BELONGING TO THE SUBJECT OF THE ENSUING DISCOURSE**

##### **Section 1. Concerning the Nature of the Will.**

IT may possibly be thought, that there is no great need of going about to define or describe the Will; this word being generally as well understood as any other words we can use to explain it: and so perhaps it would be, had not philosophers, metaphysicians, and polemic divines, brought the matter into obscurity by the things they have said of it. But since it is so, I think it may be of some use, and will tend to greater clearness in The following discourse, to say a few things concerning it.

And therefore I observe, that the Will (without any metaphysical refining) is, That by which the mind chooses any thing. The faculty of the will, is that power, or principle of mind, by which it is capable of choosing: an act of the will is the same as an act of choosing or choice.

If any think it is a more perfect definition of the will, to say, that it is that by which the soul either chooses or refuses, I am content with it; though I think it enough to say, it is that by which the soul chooses: for in every act of will whatsoever, the mind chooses one thing rather than another; it chooses something rather than the contrary or rather than the want or non-existence of that thing. So in every act of refusal, the mind chooses the absence of the thing refused; the positive and the negative are set before the mind for its choice, and it chooses the negative; and the mind's making its choice in that case is properly the act of the Will: the Will's determining between the two, is a voluntary determination; but that is the same thing as making a choice. So that by whatever names we call the act of the Will, choosing, refusing, approving, disapproving, liking, disliking, embracing, rejecting, determining, directing, commanding, forbidding, inclining, or being averse, being pleased or displeased with; all may be reduced to this of choosing. For the soul to act voluntarily, is evermore to act electively. Mr. Locke (1) says, "The Will signifies nothing but a power or ability to prefer or choose." And, in the foregoing page, he says, "The word preferring seems best to express the act of volition;" but adds, that "it does it not precisely; for, though a man would prefer flying to walking, yet who can say he ever wills it?" But the instance he mentions, does not prove that there is any thing else in willing, but merely preferring: for it

should be considered what is the immediate object of the will, with respect to a man's walking, or any other external action; which is not being removed from one place to another; on the earth or through the air; these are remoter objects of preference; but such or such an immediate exertion of himself. The thing next chosen, or preferred, when a man wills to walk is not his being removed to such a place where he would be, but such an exertion and motion of his legs and feet &c, in order to it. And his willing such an alteration in his body in the present moment, is nothing else but his choosing or preferring such an alteration in his body at such a moment, or his liking it better than the forbearance of it. And God has so made and established the human nature, the soul being united to a body in proper state that the soul preferring or choosing such an immediate exertion or alteration of the body, such an alteration instantaneously follows. There is nothing else in the actions of my mind, that I am conscious of while I walk, but only my preferring or choosing, through successive moments that there should be such alterations of my external sensations and motions; together with a concurring habitual expectation that it will be so; having ever found by experience, that on such an immediate preference, such sensations and motions do actually, instantaneously, and constantly arise. But it is not so in the case of flying; though a man may be said remotely to choose or prefer flying; yet he does not prefer, or desire, under circumstances in view, any immediate exertion of the members of his body in order to it; because he has no expectation that he should obtain the desired end by any such exertion and he does not prefer, or incline to, any bodily exertion under this apprehended circumstance, of its being wholly in vain. So that if we carefully distinguish the proper objects of the several acts of the will, it will not appear by this, and such like instances, that there is any difference between volition and preference; or that a man's choosing liking best, or being pleased with a thing, are not the same with his willing that thing. Thus an act of the will is commonly expressed by its pleasing a man to do thus or thus; and a man doing as he wills, and doing as he pleases are in common speech the same thing.

Mr. Locke (2) says, "The Will is perfectly distinguished from desire; which in the very same action may have quite contrary tendency from that which our wills sets us upon. A man, says he, whom I cannot deny, may oblige me to use persuasions to another, which, at the same time I am speaking, I may wish not prevail on him. In this case, it is plain the Will and Desire run counter." I do not suppose, that Will and Desire are words of precisely the same signification: Will seems to be a word of more general signification, extending to things present and absent. Desire respects something absent. I may prefer my present situation and posture, suppose sitting still, or having my eyes open, and so may will it. But yet I cannot think they are so entirely distinct, that they can ever be properly said to run counter. A man never, in any instance, wills any thing contrary to his desires, or desires any thing contrary to his will. The forementioned instance, which Mr. Locke produces, is no proof that he ever does. He may, on some consideration or other will to utter speeches which have a tendency to persuade another and still may desire that they may not persuade him; but yet his Will and

Desire do not run counter all: the thing which he wills, the very same he desires; and he does not will a thing, and desire the contrary, in any particular. In this instance, it is not carefully observed, what is the thing willed, and what is the thing desired: if it were, it would be found, that Will and Desire do not clash in the least. The thing willed on some consideration, is to utter such words; and certainly, the same consideration so influences him, that he does not desire the contrary; all things considered, he chooses to utter such words, and does not desire not to utter them. And so as to the thing which Mr. Locke speaks of as desired, viz. That the words, though they tend to persuade, should not be effectual to that end, his Will is not contrary to this; he does not will that they should be effectual, but rather wills that they should not, as he desires. In order to prove that the Will and Desire may run counter, it should be shown that they may be contrary one to the other in the same thing, or with respect to the very same object of Will or Desire: but here the objects are two; and in each, taken by themselves, the Will and Desire agree. And it is no wonder that they should not agree in different things, though but little distinguished in their nature. The Will may not agree with the Will, nor Desire agree with Desire, in different things. As in this very instance which Mr. Locke mentions, a person may, on some consideration, desire to use persuasions, and at the same time may desire they may not prevail; but yet nobody will say, that Desire runs counter to Desire; or that this proves that Desire is perfectly a distinct thing from Desire.—The like might be observed of the other instance Mr. Locke produces, of a man's desiring to be eased of pain, &c

But, not to dwell any longer on this, whether Desire and Will, and whether Preference and Volition be precisely the same things, I trust It will be allowed by all, that in every act of Will there is an act of choice; that in every volition there is a preference, or a prevailing inclination of the soul, whereby at that instant, it is out of a state of perfect indifference, with respect to the direct object of the volition. So that in every act, or going forth of the Will; there is some preponderation of the mind, one way rather than another; and the soul had rather have or do one thing, than another, or than not to have or do that thing; and that where there is absolutely no preferring or choosing, but a perfect, continuing equilibrium, there is no volition.

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