

Freedom of the Will

[Jonathan Edwards](#)

Part III

**WHEREIN IT IS CONSIDERED WHETHER THERE IS OR CAN BE ANY SORT OF
FREEDOM OF WILL,
AS THAT WHEREIN ARMINIANS PLACE THE ESSENCE OF THE LIBERTY OF ALL
MORAL AGENTS;
AND WHETHER ANY SUCH THING EVER WAS OR**

Section 6.

**Liberty of indifference, not only not necessary to Virtue, but
utterly inconsistent with it; and all, either virtuous or vicious
habits or inclinations, inconsistent with Arminian notions of
Liberty and moral Agency.**

To suppose such a freedom of will, as Arminians talk of, to be requisite to Virtue and Vice, is many ways contrary to common sense.

If Indifference belong to Liberty of Will, as Arminians suppose, and it be essential to a virtuous action, that it be performed in a state of Liberty, as they also suppose; it will follow, that it is essential to a virtuous action, that it be performed in a state of Indifference: and if it be performed in a state of indifference, then doubtless it must be performed in the time of Indifference. And so it will follow, that in order to the Virtue of an act, the heart must be indifferent in the time of the performance of that act and the more indifferent and cold the heart is with relation to the act performed, so much the better; because the act is performed with so much the greater Liberty. But is this agreeable to the light of nature? Is it agreeable to the notions which mankind in all ages have of Virtue, that it lies in what is contrary to Indifference, even in the tendency and inclination of the heart to virtuous action; and that the stronger the inclination, and so the further from Indifference, the more virtuous the heart, and so much the more praiseworthy the act which proceeds from it?

If we should suppose (contrary to what has been before demonstrated) that there may be an act of will in a state of Indifference; for instance, this act, viz. The will determining to put itself out of a state of Indifference, and to give itself a preponderation one way; then it would follow, on Arminian principles, that this act or determination of the will is that alone wherein Virtue consists, because this only is performed, while the mind remains in a state of Indifference, and so in a state of Liberty: for when once the mind is put out of its equilibrium, it is no longer in such a state; and therefore all the acts, which follow afterwards, proceeding from bias, can have the nature neither of Virtue nor Vice.

Or if the thing which the will can do, while yet in a state of Indifference, and so of Liberty, be only to suspend acting, and determine to take the matter into consideration; then this determination is that alone wherein Virtue consists, and not proceeding to action after the scale is turned by consideration. So that it will follow, from these principles, that whatever is done after the mind, by any means, is once out of its equilibrium, and arises from an inclination, has nothing of the nature of Virtue or Vice, and is worthy of neither blame or praise. But how plainly contrary is this to the universal sense of mankind, and to the notion they have of sincerely virtuous actions! Which is, that they proceed from a heart well disposed and well inclined; and the stronger, the more fixed and determined, the good disposition of the heart, the greater the sincerity of Virtue, and so the more of its truth and reality. But if there be any acts, which are done in a state of equilibrium, or spring immediately from perfect Indifference and coldness of heart, they cannot arise from any good principle or disposition in the heart; and, consequently, according to common sense, have no sincere goodness in them, having no Virtue of heart in them. To have a virtuous heart, is to have a heart that favours Virtue, and is friendly to it, and not one perfectly cold and indifferent about it.

And besides, the actions that are done in a state of Indifference, or that arise immediately out of such a state, cannot be virtuous, because, by the supposition, they are not determined by any preceding choice. For if there be preceding choice, then choice intervenes between the act and the state of Indifference; which is contrary to the supposition of the act arising immediately out of Indifference. But those acts which are not determined by preceding choice, cannot be virtuous or vicious, by Arminian principles, because they are not determined by the Will. So that neither one way, nor the other, can any actions be virtuous or vicious, according to those principles. If the action be determined by a preceding act of choice, it cannot be virtuous; because the action is not done in a state of Indifference, nor does immediately arise from such a state; and so is not done in a state of Liberty, If the action be not determined by a preceding act of choice, then it cannot be virtuous; because then the Will is not self-determined in it. So that it is made certain, that neither Virtue nor Vice can ever find any place in the universe!

Moreover, that it is necessary to a virtuous action that it be performed in a state of Indifference, under a notion of that being a state of liberty, is contrary to common sense; as it is a dictate of common sense, that indifference itself, in many cases, is vicious, and so to a high degree. As if when I see my neighbour or near friend, and one who has in the highest degree merited of me, in extreme distress, and ready to perish, I find an Indifference in my heart with respect to any thing proposed to be done, which I can easily do, for his relief. So if it should be proposed to me to blaspheme God, or kill my father, or do numberless other things, which might be mentioned; the being indifferent, for a moment, would be highly vicious and vile.

And it may be further observed, that to suppose this Liberty of Indifference is essential to Virtue and vice, destroys the great difference of degrees of the guilt of different crimes, and takes away the heinousness of the most flagitious, horrid iniquities; such as adultery, bestiality, murder, perjury, blasphemy, &c. For, according to these principles,

there is no harm at all in having the mind in a state of perfect Indifference with respect to these crimes; nay, it is absolutely necessary in order to any Virtue in avoiding them, or Vice in doing them. But for the mind to be in a state of Indifference with respect to them, is to be next door to doing them: it is then infinitely near to choosing, and so committing the fact: for equilibrium is the next step to a degree of preponderation; and one, even the least degree of preponderation (all things considered) is choice. And not only so, but for the Will to be in a state of perfect equilibrium with respect to such crimes, is for the mind to be in such a state, as to be full as likely to choose them as to refuse them, to do them as to omit them. And if our minds must be in such a state, wherein it is as near to choosing as refusing, and wherein it must of necessity, according to the nature of things, be as likely to commit them, as to refrain from them; where is the exceeding heinousness of choosing and committing them? If there be no harm in often being in such a state, where in the probability of doing and forbearing are exactly equal, there being an equilibrium, and no more tendency to one than the other; then, according to the nature and laws of such a contingency, it may be expected, as an inevitable consequence of such a disposition of things, that we should choose them as often as reject them: that it should generally so fall out is necessary, as equality in the effect is the natural consequence of the equal tendency of the cause, or of the antecedent state of things from which the effect arises. Why then should we be so exceedingly to blame, if it does so fall out?

It is many ways apparent, that the Arminian scheme of Liberty is utterly inconsistent with the being of any such things as either virtuous or vicious habits or dispositions. If Liberty of Indifference be essential to moral Agency, then there can be no Virtue in any habitual inclinations of the heart; which are contrary to Indifference, and imply in their nature the very destruction and exclusion of it. They suppose nothing can be virtuous in which no Liberty is exercised; but how absurd is it to talk of exercising Indifference under bias and preponderation!

And if self-determining power in the will be necessary to moral Agency, praise, blame, &c. then nothing done by the will can be any further praiseworthy or blameworthy, than so far as the will is moved, swayed, and determined by itself, and the scales turned by the sovereign power the Will has over itself. And therefore the Will must not be out of its balance, preponderation must not be determined and effected before-hand; and so the self-determining act anticipated. Thus it appears another way, that habitual bias is inconsistent with that Liberty, which Arminians suppose to be necessary to Virtue or Vice; and so it follows, that habitual bias itself cannot be either virtuous or vicious.

The same thing follows from their doctrine concerning the Inconsistence of Necessity with Liberty, praise, dispraise, &c. None will deny, that bias and inclination may be so strong as to be invincible, and leave no possibility of the Will determining contrary to it; and so be attended with Necessity. This Dr. Whitby allows concerning the Will of God, angels, and glorified saints, with respect to good; and the Will of devils, with respect to evil. Therefore, if Necessity be inconsistent with Liberty, then, when fixed inclination is to such a degree of strength, it utterly excludes all Virtue, Vice, praise, or blame. And, if so, then the nearer habits are to this strength, the more do they impede Liberty, and so

diminish praise and blame. If very strong habits destroy Liberty, the lesser ones proportionably hinder it, according to their degree of strength. And therefore it will follow, that then is the act most virtuous or vicious, when performed without any inclination or habitual bias at all; because it is then performed with most Liberty.

Every prepossessing fixed bias on the mind brings a degree of moral inability for the contrary; because so far as the mind is biased and prepossessed, so much hindrance is there of the contrary. And therefore if moral inability be inconsistent with moral Agency, or the nature of Virtue and Vice, then, so far as there is any such thing as evil disposition of heart, or habitual depravity of inclination; whether covetousness, pride, malice, cruelty, or whatever else; so much the more excusable persons are; so much the less have their evil acts of this kind the nature of Vice. And on the contrary, whatever excellent dispositions and inclinations they have so much are they the less virtuous.

It is evident, that no habitual disposition of heart can be in any degree virtuous or vicious, or the actions which proceed from them at all praiseworthy or blameworthy. Because, though we should suppose the habit not to be of such strength, as wholly to take away all moral ability and self-determining power; or may be partly from bias, and in part from self-determination; yet in this case, all that is from antecedent bias must be set aside, as of no consideration; and in estimating the degree of Virtue or Vice, no more must be considered than what arises from self-determining power, without any influence of that bias, because Liberty is exercised in no more: so that all that is the exercise of habitual inclination is thrown away, as not belonging to the morality of the action. By which it appears, that no exercise of these habits, let them be stronger or weaker, can ever have any thing of the nature of either virtue or Vice.

Here if any one should say, that notwithstanding all these things, there may be the nature of Virtue and Vice in the habits of the mind; because these habits may be the effects of those acts, wherein the mind exercised Liberty; that however the forementioned reasons will prove that no habits, which are natural, or that are born or created with us, can be either virtuous or vicious; yet they will not prove this of habits, which have been acquired and established by repeated free acts.

To such an objector I would say, that this evasion will not at all help the matter. For if freedom of Will be essential to the very nature of Virtue and Vice, then there is no Virtue or Vice but only in that very thing, wherein this Liberty is exercised. If a man in one or more things, that he does, exercises Liberty, and then by those acts is brought into such circumstances, that his Liberty ceases, and there follows a long series of acts or events that come to pass necessarily; those consequent acts are not virtuous or vicious, rewardable or punishable; but only the free acts that established this necessity; for in them alone was the man free. The following effects, that are necessary, have no more of the nature of Virtue or Vice, than health or sickness of body have properly the nature of Virtue or Vice, being the effects of a course of free acts of temperance or intemperance; or than the good qualities of a clock are of the nature of Virtue, which are the effects of free acts of the artificer; or the goodness and sweetness of the fruits of a

garden are moral Virtues, being the effects of the free and faithful acts of the gardener. If Liberty be absolutely requisite to the morality of actions, and necessity wholly inconsistent with it, as Arminians greatly insist; then no necessary effects whatsoever, let the cause be never so good or bad, can be virtuous or vicious; but the Virtue or Vice must be only in the free cause. Agreeably to this, Dr. Whitby supposes, the necessity that attends the good and evil habits of the saints in heaven, and damned in hell, which are the consequence of their free acts in their state of probation, are not rewardable or punishable.

On the whole, it appears, that if the notions of Arminians concerning Liberty and moral Agency be true, it will follow, that there is no virtue in any such habits or qualities as humility, meekness, patience, mercy, gratitude, generosity, heavenly-mindedness; nothing at all praiseworthy in loving Christ above father and mother, wife and children, or our own lives; or in delight in holiness, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, love to enemies, universal benevolence to mankind: and, on the other hand, there is nothing at all vicious, or worthy of dispraise, in the most sordid, beastly, malignant, devilish dispositions; in being ungrateful, profane, habitually hating God, and things sacred and holy; or in being most treacherous, envious, and cruel towards men. For all these things are dispositions and inclinations of the heart. And in short, there is no such thing as any virtuous or vicious quality of mind; no such thing as inherent virtue and holiness, or vice and sin: and the stronger those habits or dispositions are, which used to be called virtuous and vicious, the further they are from being so indeed; the more violent men's lusts are, the more fixed their pride, envy, ingratitude, and maliciousness, still the further are they from being blameworthy. If there be a man that by his own repeated acts, or by any other means, is come to be of the most hellish disposition, desperately inclined to treat his neighbours with injuriousness, contempt, and malignity; the further they should be from any disposition to be angry with him, or in the least to blame him. So, on the other hand, if there be a person, who is of a most excellent spirit, strongly inclining him to the most amiable actions, admirably meek, benevolent, &c. so much is he further from any thing rewardable or commendable. On which principles, the man Jesus Christ was very far from being praiseworthy for those acts of holiness and kindness which he performed, these propensities being strong in his heart. And above all, the infinitely holy and gracious God is infinitely remote from any thing commendable, his good inclinations being infinitely strong, and he, therefore, at the utmost possible distance from being at Liberty. And in all cases, the stronger the inclinations of any are to Virtue, and the more they love it, the less virtuous, and the more they love wickedness, the less vicious they are.—Whether these things are agreeable to Scripture, let every Christian, and every man who has read the Bible, judge: and whether they are agreeable to common sense, let every one judge, that has human understanding in exercise.

And, if we pursue these principles, we shall find that Virtue and Vice are wholly excluded out of the world; and that there never was, nor ever can be, any such thing as one or the other; either in God, angels, or men. No propensity, disposition, or habit can be virtuous or vicious, as has been shown; because they, so far as they take place, destroy the freedom of the will, the foundation of all moral Agency, and exclude all

capacity of either Virtue or Vice. —And if habits and dispositions themselves be not virtuous nor vicious, neither can the exercise of these dispositions be so: for the exercise of bias is not the exercise of free self-determining will, and so there is no exercise of Liberty in it. Consequently, no man is virtuous or vicious, either in being well or ill disposed, nor in acting from a good or bad disposition. And whether this bias or disposition be habitual or not, if it exists but a moment before the act of Will which is the effect of it, it alters not the case, as to the necessity of the effect. Or if there be no previous disposition at all, either habitual or occasional, that determines the act, then it is not choice that determines it: it is therefore a contingency, that happens to the man, arising from nothing in him; and is necessary, as to any inclination or choice of his; and, therefore, cannot make him either the better or worse; any more than a tree is better than other trees, because it oftener happens to be lighted upon by a nightingale; or a rock more vicious than other rocks, because rattle-snakes have happened oftener to crawl over it. So, that there is no Virtue nor vice in good or bad dispositions, either fixed or transient; nor any Virtue or Vice in acting from any good or bad previous inclination; nor yet any Virtue or Vice in acting wholly without any previous inclination. Where then shall we find room for Virtue or Vice?

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*. If you would like to discuss this article in our online community, please visit our [RPM Forum](#).

Subscribe to RPM

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [RPM](#), please select this [link](#).