

## Freedom of the Will

[Jonathan Edwards](#)

### Part IV

**WHEREIN THE CHIEF GROUNDS OF THE REASONINGS OF  
ARMINIANS, IN SUPPORT AND DEFENSE OF THE  
AFOREMENTIONED NOTIONS OF LIBERTY, MORAL AGENCY,  
&C. AND AGAINST THE OPPOSITE DOCTRINE, ARE  
CONSIDERED.**

### Section 2.

**The Falseness and Inconsistence of that Metaphysical Notion  
of Action and Agency Which Seems to be Generally  
Entertained by the Defenders of the Arminian Doctrine  
concerning Liberty, Moral Agency, &c.**

One thing, that is made very much a ground of argument and supposed demonstration by Arminians, in defense of the fore-mentioned principles concerning moral agency, virtue, vice, &c., is their metaphysical notion of agency and action. They say, unless the soul has a self-determining power, it has no power of action; if its volitions be not caused by itself, but are excited and determined by some extrinsic cause, they cannot be the soul's own acts; and that the soul cannot be active, but must be wholly passive, in those effects which it is the subject of necessarily, and not from its own free determination.

Mr. Chubb lays the foundation of his scheme of liberty, and of his arguments to support it, very much in this position, that man is an agent, and capable of action,— which doubtless is true: but self-determination belongs to his notion of action, and is the very essence of it; whence he infers, that it is impossible for a man to act and be acted upon, in the same thing, at the same time; and that nothing that is an action, can be the effect of the action of another: and he insists, that a necessary agent, or an agent that is necessarily determined to act, is a plain contradiction.

But those are a precarious sort of demonstrations, which men build on the meaning that they arbitrarily affix to a word; especially when that meaning is abstruse, inconsistent, and entirely diverse from the original sense of the word in common speech.

That the meaning of the word action, as Mr. Chubb and many others use it, is utterly unintelligible and inconsistent, is manifest, because it belongs to their notion of an action, that it is something wherein is no passion or passiveness; that is, (according to their sense of passiveness,) it is under the power, influence, or action of no cause. And

this implies, that action has no cause, and is no effect; for to be an effect implies passiveness, or the being subject to the power and action of its cause. And yet they hold, that the mind's action is the effect of its own determination; yea, the mind's free and voluntary determination, which is the same with free choice. So that action is the effect of something preceding, even a preceding act of choice: and consequently, in this effect, the mind is passive, subject to the power and action of the preceding cause, which is the foregoing choice, and therefore cannot be active. So that here we have this contradiction, that action is always the effect of foregoing choice, and therefore cannot be action; because it is passive to the power of that preceding causal choice; and the mind cannot be active and passive in the same thing, at the same time. Again, they say, necessity is utterly inconsistent with action, and a necessary action is a contradiction; and so their notion of action implies contingency, and excludes all necessity. And, therefore, their notion of action implies, that it has no necessary dependence or connection with any thing foregoing; for such a dependence or connection excludes contingency, and implies necessity. And yet their notion of action implies necessity, and supposes that it is necessary, and cannot be contingent. For they suppose, that whatever is properly called action, must be determined by the will and free choice; and this is as much as to say, that it must be necessary, being dependent upon, and determined by, something foregoing, namely, a foregoing act of choice. Again, it belongs to their notion of action, of that which is a proper and mere act, that it is the beginning of motion, or of exertion of power, but yet it is implied in their notion of action, that it is not the beginning of motion or exertion of power, but is consequent and dependent on a preceding exertion of power, viz. the power of will and choice; for they say there is no proper action but what is freely chosen, or, which is the same thing, determined by a foregoing act of free choice. But if any of them shall see cause to deny this, and say they hold no such thing, as that every action is chosen or determined by a foregoing choice, but that the very first exertion of will only, undetermined by any preceding act, is properly called action; then I say, such a man's notion of action implies necessity; for what the mind is the subject of, without the determination of its own previous choice, it is the subject of necessarily, as to any hand that free choice has in the affair, and without any ability the mind has to prevent it by any will or election of its own; because, by the supposition, it precludes all previous acts of will or choice in the case, which might prevent it. So that it is again, in this other way, implied in their notion of act, that it is both necessary and not necessary, Again, it belongs to their notion of an act, that it is no effect of a predetermining bias or preponderation, but springs immediately out of indifference; and this implies, that it cannot be from foregoing choice, which is foregoing preponderation: if it be not habitual, but occasional, yet if it cause the act, it is truly previous, efficacious, and determining. And yet, at the same time, it is essential to their notion of the act, that it is what the agent is the author of, freely and voluntarily, and that is by previous choice and design.

So that, according to their notion of the act, considered with regard to its consequences, these following things are all essential to it; viz. That it should be necessary, and not necessary; that it should be from a cause, and no cause; that it should be the fruit of choice and design, and not the fruit of choice and design; that it should be the beginning of motion or exertion, and yet consequent on previous exertion; that it should be before

it is; that it should spring immediately out of indifference and equilibrium, and yet be the effect of preponderation; that it should be self-originated, and also have its original from something else; that it is what the mind causes itself, of its own will, and can produce or prevent, according to its choice or pleasure, and yet what the mind has no power to prevent, precluding all previous choice in the affair.

So that an act, according to their metaphysical notion of it, is something of which there is no idea; it is nothing but a confusion of the mind, excited by words, without any distinct meaning, and is an absolute nonentity; and that in two respects. (1.) There is nothing in the world that ever was, is, or can be, to answer the things which must belong to its description, according to what they suppose to be essential to it. And (2,) there neither is, nor ever was, nor can be, any notion or idea to answer the word, as they use and explain it. For, if we should suppose any such notion, it would many ways destroy itself. But it is impossible any idea or notion should subsist in the mind, whose very nature and essence which constitutes it, destroys it. If some learned philosopher, who had been abroad, in giving an account of the curious observations he had made in his travels, should say, "he had been in Terra del Fuego, and there had seen an animal, which he calls by a certain name, that begat and brought forth itself, and yet had a sire and dam distinct from itself; that it had an appetite, and was hungry before it had a being; that his master, who led him, and governed him at his pleasure, was always governed by him, and driven by him where he pleased; that when he moved, he always took a step before the first step; that he went with his head first, and yet always went tail foremost; and this, though he had neither tail nor head." it would be no impudence at all to tell such a traveler, though a learned man, that he himself had no notion or idea of such an animal as he gave an account of, and never had, nor ever should have.

As the fore-mentioned notion of action is very inconsistent, so it is wholly diverse from the original meaning of the word. The more usual signification of it, in vulgar speech, seems to be some motion or exertion of power, that is voluntary, or that is the effect of the will, and is used in the same sense as doing; and most commonly it is used to signify outward actions. So thinking is often distinguished from acting, and desiring and willing from doing.

Besides this more usual and proper signification of the word action, there are other ways in which the word is used that are less proper, which yet have place in common speech. Oftentimes it is used to signify some motion or alteration in inanimate things, with relation to some object and effect. So, the spring of a watch is said to act upon the chain and wheels; the sunbeams, to act upon plants and trees; and the fire, to act upon wood. Sometimes the word is useful to signify motions, alterations, and exertions of power, which are seen in corporeal things, considered absolutely; especially when these motions seem to arise from some internal cause which is hidden; so that they have a greater resemblance of those motions of our bodies which are the effects of natural volition, or invisible exertions of will. So, the fermentation of liquor, the operations of the loadstone, and of electrical bodies, are called the action of these things. And sometimes, the word action is used to signify the exercise of thought, or of will and inclination: so meditating, loving, hating, inclining, disinclining, choosing, and

refusing, may be sometimes called acting; though more rarely (unless it be by philosophers and metaphysicians) than in any of the other senses.

But the word is never used in vulgar speech in that sense which Arminian divines use it in, namely, for the self-determinate exercise of the will, or an exertion of the soul, that arises without any necessary connection with any thing foregoing. If a man does something voluntarily, or as the effect of his choice, then, in the most proper sense, and as the word is most originally and commonly used, he is said to act; but whether that choice or volition be self-determined, or no; whether it be connected with foregoing, habitual bias; whether it be the certain effect of the strongest motive, or some intrinsic cause, never comes into consideration in the meaning of the word.

And if the word action is arbitrarily used by some men otherwise, to suit some scheme of metaphysics or morality, no argument can reasonably be founded on such a use of this term, to prove any thing but their own pleasure. For divines and philosophers strenuously to urge such arguments, as though they were sufficient to support and demonstrate a whole scheme of moral philosophy and divinity, is certainly to erect a mighty edifice on the sand, or rather on a shadow. And though it may now perhaps, through custom, have become natural for then to use the word in this sense, (if that may be called a sense or meaning, which is inconsistent with itself,) yet this does not prove that it is agreeable to the natural notions men have of things, or that there can be any thing in the creation that should answer such a meaning. And though they appeal to experience, yet the truth is, that men are so far from experiencing any such thing, that it is impossible for them to have any conception of it.

If it should be objected, that action and passion are doubtless words of a contrary signification; but to suppose that the agent, in its action, is under the power and influence of something intrinsic, is to confound action and passion, and make them the same thing:

I answer, that action and passion are doubtless, as they are sometimes used, words of opposite signification; but not as signifying opposite existences, but only opposite relations. The words cause and effect are terms of opposite signification; but, nevertheless, if I assert that, the same thing may, at the same time, in different respects and relations, be both cause and effect, this will not prove that I confound the terms. The soul may be both active and passive in the same thing in different respects; active with relation to one thing, and passive with relation to another. The word passion, when set in opposition to action, or rather activeness, is merely a relative: it signifies no effect or cause, nor any proper existence; but is the same with passiveness, or a being passive, or a being acted upon by something. Which is a mere relation of a thing to some power or force exerted by some cause, producing some effect in it or upon it. And action, when set properly in opposition to passion, or passiveness, is no real existence; it is not the same with an action, but is a mere relation: it is the activeness of something on another thing, being the opposite relation to the other, viz. a relation of power, or force, exerted by some cause towards another thing, which is the subject of the effect of that power. Indeed, the word action is frequently used to signify something not merely

relative, but more absolute, and a real existence; as when we say an action; when the word is not used transitively, but absolutely, for some motion or exercise of body or mind, without any relation to any object or effect: and as used thus, it is not properly the opposite of passion, which ordinarily signifies nothing absolute, but merely the relation of being acted upon. And therefore, if the word action be useful in the like relative sense, then action and passion are only two contrary relations. And it is no absurdity to suppose, that contrary relations may belong to the same thing, at the same time, with respect to different things. So, to suppose that there are acts of the soul by which a man voluntarily moves, and acts upon objects, and produces effects which yet themselves are effects of something else, and wherein the soul itself is the object of something acting upon, and influencing that, does not at all confound action and passion. The words may nevertheless be properly of opposite signification: there may be as true and real a difference between acting and being caused to act, though we should suppose the soul to be both in the same volition, as there is between living and being quickened, or made to live. It is no more a contradiction, to suppose that action may be the effect of some other cause besides the agent or being that acts, than to suppose, that life may be the effect of some other cause, besides the liver, or the being that lives, in whom life is caused to be.

The thing which has led men into this inconsistent notion of action, when applied to volition, as though it were essential to this internal action, that the agent should be self-determined in it, and that the will should be the cause of it, was probably this,— that, according to the sense of mankind, and the common use of language, it is so, with respect to men's external actions, which are what originally, and according to the vulgar use and most proper sense of the word, are called actions. Men in these are self-directed, self-determined, and their wills are the cause of the motions of their bodies, and the external things that are done; so that unless men do them voluntarily, and of choice, and the action be determined by their antecedent volition, it is no action or doing of theirs. Hence some metaphysicians have been led unwarily, but exceeding absurdly, to suppose the same concerning volition itself, that that also must be determined by the will; which is to be determined by antecedent volition, as the motion of the body is; not considering the contradiction it implies.

But it is very evident, that in the metaphysical distinction between action and passion, (though long since become common and the general vogue,) due care has not been taken to conform language to the nature of things, or to any distinct, clear ideas; — as it is in innumerable other philosophical, metaphysical terms, used in these disputes; which has occasioned inexpressible difficulty, contention, error, and confusion.

And thus probably it came to be thought that necessity was inconsistent with action, as these terms are applied to volition. First, these terms, action and necessity, are changed from their original meaning, as signifying external voluntary action and constraint, (in which meaning they are evidently inconsistent,) to signify quite other things, viz. volition itself, and certainty of existence. And when the change of signification is made, care is not taken to make proper allowances and abatements for the difference of sense; but still the same things are unwarily attributed to action and necessity, in the new meaning

of the words, which plainly belonged to them in their first sense; and on this ground, maxims are established without any real foundation, as though they were the most certain truths, and the most evident dictates of reason.

But, however strenuously it is maintained, that what is necessary cannot be properly called action, and that a necessary action is a contradiction, yet it is probable there are few Arminian divines, who, if thoroughly tried, would stand to these principles. They will allow, that God is, in the highest sense, an active being, and the highest fountain of life and action; and they would not probably deny, that those that are called God's acts of righteousness, holiness, and faithfulness, are truly and properly God's acts, and God is really a holy agent in them; and yet, I trust, they will not deny, that God necessarily acts justly and faithfully, and that it is impossible for Him to act unrighteously and unholy.

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