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Edwards on the Will: A Century of American Theological Debate

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Edwards on the Will: A Century of American Theological Debate

Description

Jonathan Edwards towered over his contemporaries--a man over six feet tall and a figure of theological stature--but the reasons for his power have been a matter of dispute. *Edwards on the Will* offers a persuasive explanation. In 1753, after seven years of personal trials, which included dismissal from his Northampton church, Edwards submitted a treatise, *Freedom of the Will*, to Boston publishers. Its impact on Puritan society was profound. He had refused to be trapped either by a new Arminian scheme that seemed to make God impotent or by a Hobbesian natural determinism that made morality an illusion. He both reasserted the primacy of God's will and sought to reconcile freedom with necessity. In the process he shifted the focus from the community of duty to the freedom of the individual. Edwards died of smallpox in 1758 soon after becoming president of Princeton; as one obituary said, he was "a most rational . . . and exemplary Christian." Thereafter, for a century or more, all discussion of free will and on the church as an enclave of the pure in an impure society had to begin with Edwards. His disciples, the "New Divinity" men--principally Samuel Hopkins of Great Barrington and Joseph Bellamy of Bethlehem, Connecticut--set out to defend his thought. Ezra Stiles, president of Yale, tried to keep his influence off the Yale Corporation, but Edwards's ideas spread beyond New Haven and sparked the religious revivals of the next decades. In the end, old Calvinism returned to Yale in the form of Nathaniel William Taylor, the Boston Unitarians captured Harvard, and Edwards's troublesome ghost was laid to rest. The debate on human freedom versus necessity continued, but theologians no longer controlled it. In *Edwards on the Will*, Guelzo presents with clarity and force the story of these fascinating maneuverings for the soul of New England and of the emerging nation. [From the publisher]

Keywords

Jonathan Edwards, Great Awakening, religion, Protestantism, evangelical, individualism

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Comments

Attached is the introduction to Dr. Allen C. Guelzo's book, *Edwards on the Will: A Century of American Theological Debate*.

Introduction

“Edwards on the Will”

“Edwards on the Will”—no single title in American literature has ever had quite the ring of finality, of unquestioned settlement of dispute, as this. For Herman Melville, it was the obvious key to unlock the mystery of *Bartleby the Scrivener*; for Oliver Wendell Holmes, it was the supreme creation of the Puritanism he longed to shed, so maddeningly perfect in all its parts that it was impervious to logical wear and tear; for Harriet Beecher Stowe, it was the touchstone of New England Calvinism and New England identity. One hundred and ten years after the first appearance of “Edwards on the Will,” Rowland Hazard, the amateur Quaker-born philosopher, helplessly acknowledged that “by common consent” it was “deemed impregnable.” In Scotland, Thomas Chalmers lauded it as that “which has helped me more than any other uninspired book to find my way through all that might otherwise have proved baffling, and transcendental, and mysterious in the peculiarities of Calvinism.” In Isaac Taylor’s pungent phrase, it taught the world “to be less flippant.”¹

And yet, for all the laurels heaped upon it, Jonathan Edwards’s *A Careful and Strict Enquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of that Freedom of Will which is supposed to be essential to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame* has proven in modern times an elusive work. Edwards’s literary and historical admirers are generally content to let its sleeping dogmas lie, to acknowledge in a breath its genius and then move hurriedly past to other Edwardseana of less forbidding aspect. Perhaps this is because it is in the nature of literary history to confuse the historical and the aesthetic, and to think that an aesthetic appreciation of grandeur is an adequate substitute for historical understanding; perhaps it is because Edwards

has fared better at the hands of historians of philosophy since they usually want, for heuristic purposes, an Edwards of paramount genius sufficient to justify the study of American philosophy (and "Edwards on the Will" gives them this beyond question); but they also want a teleology that will guarantee the triumph of a Benjamin Franklin (who, ironically, wrote an early dissertation on freedom of the will himself). No one seems to fail to call *Freedom of the Will* a work of genius; but by acknowledging its genius scholars have apparently assumed that *Freedom of the Will* need no longer be taken seriously as history.

So, for a considerably long period of time, Edwards's massive exposition of "that freedom of will" has been treated as a kind of cultural oxymoron, without father, without mother, without genealogy, a New England Melchizedek greeting a bewildered American Abraham with sacrifices which secretly terrify him. It has been stood off by itself, like a Puritan *doctrine* bereft of any *uses* or *applications*, as though it were feared that the *uses* of such a work might be more (as someone once said of Edwards's personality) than ordinary people could bear. Sometimes, *Freedom of the Will* has been looked upon as the ultimate jeremiad. More often, we have taken Holmes's way out and caricatured it as Holmes did in "The Deacon's Masterpiece," as a sort of "wonderful one-hoss shay," an interesting contraption to be sure, but one which conveniently fell apart on its own in some unexplained fashion, thus eliminating the need to confront either its claims or its consequences. One literary historian cried out in frustration at a 1984 conference on Edwards, "What does this preoccupation with the will mean?" And it was a frustration as much directed at his fellows as at Edwards.

Part of the problem, to be fair, is that our expectations of Edwards may actually be too high. *Freedom of the Will* is a work of philosophical genius, but Edwards was not a consistent philosopher; he considered himself first and foremost a Congregational parson and never thought of himself as a philosopher. Those who expect his *Miscellanies* (when they are finally published in full) to yield a full intellectual crop are in for an unpleasant surprise. Nor is this merely an accident of genre, for no work of Edwards reveals his patchiness and "variousness" as a thinker more than *Freedom of the Will*. For instance it is a book of undisguised theological intentions, put in terms of a "secular" argument. And it is also a book which introduces a powerful and systematic case for Calvinist predestinarianism, but which concludes by

asserting that the author, at least on his own terms, really does believe in freedom of the will.

On the other hand, one has to grant at least some of his "variousness" to genre, if only because the subject of "free will" encompasses so great a stretch of philosophical terrain, and his place as a specifically Christian thinker only made his path through that terrain narrower and more treacherous. The very fact that the concept of "will" has found a place in Western philosophy owes more to Christian theology than a philosophy. The Greeks, for one, never talked about the "will" or "freedom of the will"; the notion is untranslatable into Platonic or Homeric Greek.² The vital catalyst in the arrival of the idea of an independent faculty of will was the intermingling of Christian theology, and the psychology it implied, and classical civilization. And no single Christian theologian did more to bring the concept of the will, conceived as a separate entity, into common currency than St. Augustine, whose *Confessions* are the first book of Christian spirituality to mark out clearly the full force of the limits of human freedom by "a chain of habit" within with no reference point other than willing itself.³ "I knew I had a will [*voluntas*]," Augustine wrote, "as surely as I knew I had life in me." He clearly perceived that, within his conscious self, the mind may try to order itself to "make an act of will . . . yet it does not carry out its own command." Hence, this opposition of mind and will is so formidable, and the mind so easily thwarted, that the "will" must surely enjoy a status independent of the understanding or the appetites, and is sufficiently powerful to check the mind: "the mind is not moved until it wills to be moved." Augustine discovered, when he first contemplated making a public confession of Christianity, that his ideas were entirely at the mercy of an obstinate will: "I was held fast, not in fetters clamped upon me by another, but by my own will, which had the strength of iron chains."⁴ Augustine's fascinated exploration of the notion of will by no means settled what the nature of that will was.

According to the categories of the Protestant scholastic thought of the seventeenth century, the most critical relationship among the faculties of the mind was considered to be one of intellect and will, both of which were viewed, along with perception and judgment, as subdepartments of the overall phenomenon of mind. Because of the inherent bias of Christian theology toward teleological considerations, the Protestant scholastics—Turretin, Burgersdyck, Voetius, de Maastricht,

all of whom Jonathan Edwards was to read as a Yale undergraduate—structured these subdepartments, or faculties, as a hierarchy, and graded them from the most important to the least. But there was no agreement, even in Calvinist New England, on whether intellect or will ought to have first place. “Intellectualists,” for instance, placed the intellect first, and conceived of thought as a process in which the intellect synthesizes the information provided by perception and judgment and gives the will orders to follow or to flee from the object of thought. The intellect, then, was clearly considered to be superior to the will, which exists primarily to execute the orders of the intellect. While this is certainly not an Augustinian notion, it has strong classical overtones nevertheless and it acquired a strong following in Christian thought, including the moral philosophy presented in textbooks of Edwards’s New England.⁵ Calvin taught that “the human soul consists of two faculties, understanding and will”; the understanding distinguishes between good and bad, and the will either follows or flees as the understanding dictates. The mind thus judges—and in judging it instructs the will how to respond, so that “the understanding is, as it were, the leader and governor of the soul; and that the will is always mindful of the bidding of the understanding, and its own desires await the judgment of the understanding.”⁶ The understanding, Calvin concluded, “is our most excellent part; it holds the primacy in the life of man, is the seat of reason, presides over the will, and restrains vicious desires.”⁷

Diametrically opposed (at least on paper) to the intellectualist stood the “voluntarist,” who awarded the will the supremacy over the intellect in choice, and this, too, had an impressive genealogy, stretching back through Scotus and the Franciscans to Augustine himself. The voluntarist reversed the priority of intellect and will, and viewed the process of knowing as beginning with perception, judgment, and intellect, remaining a potential quality until and unless the will chooses to cooperate.⁸ Voluntarists gave the will this veto power over the intellect itself because they observed that people often see, judge, and understand an object to be good and desirable, yet choose evil anyway. They further observed that even the acts of perceiving, judging, and knowing require decisions to look, to reflect, and to acknowledge. The will thus stands at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of faculties; it is essential to each faculty’s operation.

Consequently, the stocking up of the understanding with appropriate facts about godliness brings submission, an end to *masterlessness*, and

a decisive act of volition. The most radical scholastic statement of this relationship was certainly John Duns Scotus's maxim *nihil aliud a voluntate est causa totalis volitionis in voluntate*⁹ (the will alone is the total cause of choice in the will). But the most piquant scholastic illustration of the incapacity of the intellect to choose is "Buridan's ass." An echo of this will turn up in *Freedom of the Will* in Edwards's example of the chess board. Suppose an ass is placed at equal distances between two equal bundles of hay. The ass's intellect perceives that both are good, but because they are equally good, he cannot tell his will which of the two is the greater good to apprehend, and so he dies of starvation in the midst of plenty since his will is compelled to wait upon recognition by the intellect of which bale is the primary good. Obviously, however, asses do not die in this way; any normal ass would have been led to the one or the other by an effort of will. It was not that voluntarists deprecated knowledge per se, but, in the words of the much revered Puritan theologian William Ames, there was no real force in it without an application of the will: "will is the principle and the first cause of all humane operation in regard to the exercise of the act"; thus, "it follows that the first and proper subject of theology is the will."¹⁰

But this left the voluntarists with the need to explain *how* the will could make all these choices *prior* to the action. The answer supplied by one school of voluntarists, ranging from Augustine to Jonathan Edwards, was to suggest that the will, although a faculty of the mind, was also directly influenced by the other great psychological entity within the human soul, the *affections*. The scholastic psychology, in which both Timothy and Jonathan Edwards were reared, pictured man as a composite of thinking (which included the mental faculties of perceiving, judging, understanding, and willing) and feeling, and they regarded the feelings, or affections, as the other great pillar of human psychology. The intellectualists had little use for the affections in their descriptions of religious psychology; the voluntarists, however, saw that the affections (which they sometimes referred to as "the heart") could often play an important role, and they frequently described conversion and depravity in terms of the affections, or "the heart."

The best example of this is Augustine himself. "In my case," Augustine explained, "love is the weight by which I act. . . . To whatever place I go, I am drawn to it by love." The will is not an independent actor; it is at the mercy of love. Augustine compared his will to a sack,

pulled down to various levels according to the amount of love weighing it down. Let the will be filled with the love of God, and the self will be drawn to follow the will to God; on the other hand, let the will be weighted with lust, and the self will be drawn to it by concupiscence.¹¹ The will could not be mere freedom, for Augustine discovered time and again that his will was not free to countermand what he loved. "Through sin freedom indeed perished," Augustine warned, for men sin, and love sinning, and so make themselves and their wills so weighted with lust that resistance is in vain. "I am better only when in sorrow of heart I detest myself and seek your mercy," Augustine prayed to God, "until what is faulty in me is repaired and made whole and finally I come to that state of peace which the eye of the proud cannot see."¹² All the emphasis here is on the quality of the affections, the purity of heart, and the proper object of love, and that becomes the central factor in choice.

Even though Calvin is usually classed as an intellectualist, he was hesitant to wall off the intellect from the play of the affections, and he occasionally granted a degree of independence to the feeling of *suavitas* ("sweetness") in religious self-knowledge.¹³ And as for his Puritan heirs, no matter what the Harvard textbooks dictated, "heart-language" remained one of the most distinguishing traits of Puritanism. John Winthrop knew he could not have been converted at age fourteen, when he had his third great round of spiritual excitements, because he could not say for sure "how my heart was affected." But when he came under the preaching of Ezekiel Culverwell in 1606, he found "the ministry of the word to come to my heart with power," so that at age thirty, God gave to him "enlargement of heart" to "cry, my father, with more confidence."¹⁴ More than Culverwell, however, Winthrop's pastor in the New World Boston, John Cotton, set forth clearly for Winthrop the Augustinian identification of the will with the "heart." "By the heart," Cotton taught, "is here understood, not as sometimes it is taken, for the mind and judgment, for they are no such faculties." Instead, "by the heart . . . is meant the will of a man, which lyes in the heart, for as the understanding lyes in the head or braine, so the will is seated in the heart."¹⁵ And with that, Cotton insisted on the psychological supremacy of this heart-cum-will. "The heart is the principall faculty of the soule, it rules all, it sets hand and tongue all within a-work." Therefore, Cotton made "keeping the heart" the essence, even the synonym, of moral choice:

Keepe the heart well, and you keepe all in a goode frame: all the senses behold not an object so much as the heart doth; Set before a man any pleasant prospect, and if his mind be on another things, all his senses take no notice of it; if the heart be not taken up with a thing, the eye minds it not; present the eare with any sweet melodious sound, and it heares and minds it not, because the heart was otherwise taken up. . . . If you have the whole man, and not the heart, you have but a dead man, get the heart and you have all.¹⁶

No matter how one chooses to define the will, the question of greatest importance will always be whether, given any of these definitions, the will is free. Unhappily, the three available answers—"sometimes" (soft determinism), "always" (libertarianism), or "never" (hard determinism)—have been applied to each of the basic theories of will, so that within each there can be conflicting answers as to whether the will is free.¹⁷

"Hard determinism" most often thinks of freedom as self-determination, and, precisely for that reason, hard determinists as a rule deny that the will can be free, simply because they do not believe that "selves" have the capacity to determine their own existence, much less their own choices. Hard determinism, according to the rationalist philosopher Brand Blanshard, is "the view that all events are caused," or "that every event A is so connected with a later event B that, given A, B must occur."¹⁸ Since it is difficult for most people to argue with the apparent obviousness of cause-effect relationships, the "soft determinists," or *reconciliationists*, generally yield ground and then try to argue about what a cause is, rather than deny that things have causes. In some circumstances, reconciliationists agree that "cause" describes something inevitable. With this notion of cause, which reconciliationists associate with objective compulsion, there is usually a struggle or combat in which the loser is necessarily overborne by the cause. There remain occasions, nevertheless, in which causality does not induce combat. Most often, reconciliationists point to events in which a subjective cause necessitates a certain movement of the will but does so in a direction we, in some way, already desire. In this respect, the will is caused but at the same time it apprehends what the self really desires anyway, and hence, there is no sense of struggle. So long as nothing external to the self interferes with such a volition, the reconciliationist demands to know why this cannot be considered a free act.

By "free," the reconciliationist means not noncausal, but simply "the ability to act according to one's choices." It is all the difference between saying "we are free to do what we will" (which is what the hard

determinist opposes) and “we are free to do as we will.” Thus, the soft determinist will ask only if an act is objectively valid—that the self can perform without physical hindrance—and leave aside the matter of subjective validity (whether the self or the will really is the cause of what the will wants to do).¹⁹

The great problem with this, respond the critics of reconciliationism, is that it resembles a sort of intellectual shell game in which determinism and free will are alternately hidden or displayed as need arises; or a sleight-of-hand trick that reconciles a contradiction chiefly by changing the meaning of one of the terms. Shell game or not, reconciliationism ironically reflects much of the ordinary patterns of human thought. R. E. Hobart has observed:

In daily life we are all determinists, just as we are all libertarians. We are constantly attributing behavior to the character, the temperament, the peculiarities of the person and expecting him to behave in certain fashions. The very words of our daily conversation . . . are full of determinism. And we see nothing inconsistent in being aware at the same time [of being] free in choosing.²⁰

The mention of libertarianism brings us to the third answer to the question of free will. Libertarianism is, essentially, the opposite of determinism, but not the polar opposite, since libertarians will grant that *some* events are caused. In general, the libertarian holds that in every circumstance a spontaneous act may or may not occur that, in turn, completely changes the course of things, and, says the libertarian, the human will is capable of providing such spontaneity.²¹ It is, in a word, *uncaused* in all, or at least in some, of its motions.

Straightforward as this sounds, there are ironies in libertarianism no less than in reconciliationism. Obviously, there is vast scope for responsibility here since the soul becomes the only agent of action. But if the will is free and uncaused, it may lead us to free action, but it may also lead us to meaningless action, or acts done wildly at random, and if the will can be free only by acting out of chance, then we are in perhaps a worse position than the hard determinist, who at least is supported by laws.

Perhaps the greatest irony in all of these terms is how little they accomplish in the way of persuasion. In some airy world of abstract theory it may be possible to arrive at an opinion concerning the will simply by examining the alternatives, and then arriving at a serenely objective decision. In fact, for most of the history of controversies over the will, the very opposite procedure has taken place: people begin

with the opinion that the will is, or is not, free a priori, and they then work back from there to which theory of will they propose to hold. This occurs chiefly because in Western Christian theology there has always been another, more powerful, Will to take into consideration beyond that of the individual human. Grant the existence of God, as Jonathan Edwards most certainly did, and one at once acknowledges a Being more powerful than oneself, and if more powerful then also able to restrict or even dictate one's choices, regardless of whether one thinks one's will free or not. Add to that the Christian doctrines of the sinful depravity of human beings and the necessity of redemption from sin by the God-Man, Jesus Christ, and it begins to appear that the human will is not only restricted before we can even agree on what it is, but that independent human willing may be downright undesirable, since the human will, being depraved, can only ever will in defiance and rebellion. The most obvious example of the impact of this theological a priori is John Calvin, who held that

By his providence, God rules not only the whole fabric of the world and its several parts, but also the hearts and even the actions of men. . . . We mean by providence not an idle observation by God in heaven of what goes on in earth, but His rule of the world which He made; for he is not the creator of a moment, but the perpetual governor. . . . So he is said to rule the world in His providence, not only because He watches the order of nature imposed by Himself, but because He has and exercises a particular care of each one of his creatures.²²

However, mere declarations of divine sovereignty—and one can get them in just as hair-raising a form from St. Thomas Aquinas as from John Calvin—do not automatically settle the matter in everyone's mind, since people are not generally fond of being told that they can't help what they're doing, no matter on whose authority. Calvin's nemesis, the Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius, rejected Calvin's notions of divine sovereignty on the humanitarian grounds that

it is scarcely possible for any other result to ensue, than that the individual who cannot even with great difficulty work a persuasion within himself of his being elected should soon consider himself included in the number of the reprobate. From such an apprehension as this must arise a certain despair of performing righteousness and obtaining salvation.²³

Arminius was perfectly happy to have God rule by "influence and concurrence" in man's salvation, but only so long as this activity amounts to no more than an "influence" on the recipients of it. Certainly Calvin and Luther and Augustine felt the sting of these criticisms, and in their

writings we see some of the finest, as well as most tortured, demonstrations of reconciliationism available, as each rushes to retort that he is really not denying free will at all. Augustine, in his struggle with the Pelagians, insisted that we always possessed *liberum arbitrium*, but not *libertas*—we have, in other words, freedom to perform the act of choice in all cases not involving outright physical compulsion, but we do not, as sinners, have the liberty to choose the objects of choice.²⁴ Luther strained in his polemic reply to Erasmus, *De Servo Arbitrio*, to make it plain that he was preaching “a necessity, not of compulsion, but of what they call immutability.”²⁵ Even Calvin claimed, “Compulsion I always exclude,” for though “we can do nothing of our own accord but sin . . . this does not therefore mean . . . a forced restraint but a voluntary obedience, to which an inborn bondage inclines us.”²⁶ Even Timothy Edwards’s near contemporary, John Norton of Boston, insisted that “Necessity of infallibility doth not prejudice liberty.”²⁷

But theological reconciliationism, like reconciliationism in general, always has an air of unreality to it, of talk that somehow masks the obvious. Calvin recognized this when he pondered the sort of free will left by the reconciliationist versions of “necessity”:

Man will then be spoken of as having this sort of free decision, not because he has free choice equally of good and evil, but because he acts wickedly by will, not by compulsion. Well put, indeed, but what purpose is served by labelling with a proud name such a slight thing? A noble freedom, indeed—for man not to be forced to serve sin, yet to be such a willing slave that his will is bound by the fetters of sin.²⁸

If we are all that eager to have free will, why not jettison predestination and save ourselves the grief of logic-chopping? Because, no matter how badly we desire to avoid holding a “repugnant” opinion, predestination has been a vital emotional part of Christianity, perhaps even more important for its aesthetic than for its doctrinal use. Just how much emotion lay behind the abstractions of “necessity” appears in manifold places, but never more dramatically than in Luther, who denied not only that he had free will but that he even wanted it:

I frankly confess that, for myself, even if it could be, I should not want free-will to be given to me, nor anything to be left in my own hands to enable me to endeavour after salvation; not merely because in the face of so many dangers, and adversities, and assaults of devils I could not stand my ground, and hold fast my “free-will” . . . but because, even were there no dangers, adversities or devils, I should still be forced to labour with no guarantee of success, and to beat my fists at the air. If I lived and worked to all eternity, my conscience

would never reach comfortable certainty as to how much it must do to satisfy God. Whatever work I had done, there would still be a nagging doubt as to whether it pleased God, or whether he required something more. The experience of all who seek righteousness by works proves that; and I learned it well enough myself over a period of many years.²⁹

In this context, Arminian (or Pelagian or Erasmian) "free-will" became a metaphor for religious indifference. And so, until the seventeenth century, the energies of Protestantism were linked, in various ways, to determinism and predestination, and doctrines of free will were considered at best to be evidence of a half-hearted Erasmianism, and, at worst, downright atheism.

The philosophical revolution of the seventeenth century we sometimes call the "New Philosophy" successfully stood that arrangement on its head, and sent Protestant divines fleeing to free will for protection from a new kind of determinism—an atheistic one. The fundamental cause for this dramatic shift lies in the seventeenth century's daring overthrow of the Aristotelian mechanics, with its conception of matter as something *moving* according to active, "occult" powers, by the new mechanics of Kepler and Galileo, with their notion of an impersonal and indifferent matter *being moved* by other matter. While the purely physical aspects of this revolution had little to do with theology, it quickly became apparent, and not only to Galileo's ecclesiastical inquisitors, that the denial of activity to matter and the exclusion of spiritual causality lay bare a route to denying the activity of God in the universe, and perhaps to atheism as well. An agitated Richard Baxter compared his modern "Epicureans" to "idle boys who tear out all the hard leaves of their books and say they have learned all when they have learned the rest," for "they cut off and deny the noblest parts of nature and then sweep together the dust of agitated atoms and tell us that they have resolved all the phenomena in nature."³⁰ On those terms, as Baxter well knew, there can be no predestination (in the sense of a divine spiritual cause) but likewise there can be no self-determination either, and humanity would, in that case, turn out to be the plaything of a faceless determinism that makes nonsense of responsibility and moral choice.

The face of this new determinism was limned out with what amounted to intellectual glee by the most notorious of Baxter's "Epicureans," Thomas Hobbes, and though he was almost the only one to put it as bluntly as he did in his *Leviathan* (1651), he still succeeded

in scaring the entire English-speaking theological community out of its wits. Hobbes preached a materialism so thoroughgoing as to make seventeenth-century readers wince, but what drove them wild was Hobbes's strategy of presenting a thoroughly materialistic concept of causality in theological terms. After all, to assert that all events happen as a result of God's laws does not seem to be saying anything all that much different from the claim that everything in the universe happens as a result of mechanical laws. This allowed the rankest materialist to denounce free will with all the zeal of the most spiritual Calvinist. "The question," Hobbes began, "is not whether a man be a free agent," since liberty "is the absence of all impediments to action that are not contained in the nature and intrinsic quality of the agent." There is no such thing as a "faculty" of willing, bound or unbound; "will" is merely the product of a chain of purely physical occurrences:

I conceive that in all deliberations, that is to say, in alternate succession of contrary appetites, the last is that which we call the WILL, and is immediately next before the doing of the action, or next before the doing of it becomes impossible. All other appetites to do, and to quit, that come upon a man during his deliberations, are called intentions, and inclinations, but not wills, there being but one will, which also in this case may be called the last will.³¹

Hobbes, in short, simply reduced the elaborate structure of scholastic psychology to a rubble of words, and eliminated any fundamental distinction between active or passive, dominant or subordinate, faculties within the mind. He conceived of volition in terms of a "single-stage" occurrence in which a single volition is merely an extension of an appetite, so that the will is whittled down to nothing more than a name by which we identify the last in a series of appetites. Add to that Hobbes's consideration that the appetites themselves are merely the mechanical by-product of sensation, and then one has but to supply an external cause, and the whole chain of appetites will necessarily and inexorably produce a volition.

I conceive that nothing taketh beginning from itself, but from the actions of some other immediate agent without itself. And that therefore, when first a man hath an appetite or will to something, to which immediately before he had no appetite or will, the cause of his will, is not the will itself, but something else not in his disposing. To that whereas it is out of controversy, that of voluntary actions the will is the necessary cause . . . it followeth that voluntary actions have all of them necessary causes, and therefore are necessitated.³²

Of course, then, men were free—just as the Calvinists had said, they were free to do what it was decreed they should do, only now material substance was doing the decreeing. This left the Calvinist with the unpleasant alternative of having to assert indeterminism and libertarianism to order to prove that the mechanical clashing of gears was not all there was to the world, or else be tarred with the brush of Hobbes's mechanism. "There is a plain agreement," Daniel Whitby declared, "betwixt the doctrine of Mr. Hobbes, and of these men [Calvinists], concerning this matter, as to the great concernments of religion," and Calvinists, even great and famous ones like Isaac Watts, took appropriate note and abandoned the predestinarian ship.³³

The only way left to prove the existence of spiritual substance seemed to be to create some room for the free will of intelligent, spiritual creatures, and this is precisely what English-speaking divines, Anglican and Nonconformist alike, rushed, if in a confused and unholy jumble, to do. They did so, as Samuel Clarke and Richard Bentley did, by pushing the question of active and passive powers back to the front and by insisting that volition really comprises a "two-stage" process in which passive desires are carefully distinguished from an active will—"a different Thing from the Act of Volition"—which is exempt from causal necessity and which is empowered to deal rationally and morally with whatever the desires may be.³⁴ In his Boyle Lectures of 1704 and 1705, Clarke insisted that the will was an active, independent agent, and not subject to simple determination:

intelligent beings are agents; not passive in being moved by motives as a balance is by weights, but they have active powers and do move themselves, sometimes upon weak ones and sometimes where things are absolutely indifferent.³⁵

Or they did so, as Thomas Reid and the Scottish "common sense" philosophers did, by appealing to the direct intuition of freedom which all men find when they have "looked into their own breasts," for the common sense of mankind intuitively senses that acts of will occur freely.³⁶ Together, their endeavor to undercut the threat of materialistic atheism by resorting to hastily fashioned brands of theistic libertarianism raised up and made respectable the old banner of "Arminianism" and threw Calvinism into a disarray from which it has never entirely emerged.

A large part of this book is given over to examining how New England Calvinism, and particularly Jonathan Edwards, responded to this

crisis. The "covenant" theology upon which so much of New England's clergy was built was itself a will-oriented theory, as was the word *covenant* itself. Unlike the medieval Church, which inherited from Thomas Aquinas a view of the relationship of God and human as static and naturalistic, the Reformation conceived of that relationship as dynamic—an unnatural, arbitrary relationship between two utterly unlike parties, which can be bridged only by an act of will. The "covenant" theology of the Puritans was simply another way of recognizing that to cross the gap separating the human being and God requires a voluntary, gracious transaction—an effort of will. Similarly, the "covenanted" churches of the New England Puritans were also a recognition that sin divides people from people, as well as people from God. They testified that the comprehensive, parish-type organization of the Church of England was as ineffective in bridging the human gap as Thomism had been in bridging the divine gap. Accordingly, the "covenanted" church embodied the same principle as the covenant theology, that true union could not be had on natural terms but only by a conscious consent—again, an effort of will. Thus, the Puritan Calvinism of New England found itself absorbed in the need to understand and control the activity and freedom of the will. And since the greater part of American intellectual life before the Civil War was in one way or another linked to Trinitarian Calvinism, it is no surprise that any approach to the problem of freedom of the will ends up heavily weighted with the names of New England Calvinists.

But Edwards's name towers above them all, and not just because his *Freedom of the Will* deals with this dilemma in a fashion sophisticated beyond the grasp of any other Calvinists (or perhaps any other Americans), and turned all subsequent discussion of freedom of the will for a century thereafter into a referendum on his ideas. On the broadest level, Edwards aimed to address an international audience, and thus deal with the perplexing reversal of roles in the eighteenth-century free-will debate. But Edwards also intended to speak to a problem in the New England mind, and *Freedom of the Will* is as much directed to weak-kneed Calvinists as it is to hard-core Arminians. *Freedom of the Will* was Edwards's means of reawakening New England to the demands of the will and to the dreadful anger of a God who kept wicked individuals out of hell only by a pure, arbitrary act of mercy. In this respect, *Freedom of the Will* shoots beyond the customary philosophical targets in the free-will debate to strike at the comfortable natural-

ism into which a century of prosperity had wooed the erstwhile soldiers of the Covenant.

Indeed, Edwards did not really address the problem of free will as a problem, after all. Instead, he used it as a way to speak to the deepest urges of Puritanism and of New England's collective memory of its own uniqueness, for Edwards's elevation of the critical significance of utter individual *choosing* in religion and ethics boded ill for the organic church-and-community relationships that American Calvinists, in New England and elsewhere, had either inherited or copied from Europe. After Edwards's death, his New Divinity disciples, bound together by the cords of *Freedom of the Will's* logic in the most remarkable speculative coterie even seen in America, launched a savage assault on the comfortable quid pro quo of church and parish under which most Calvinists had become content to live. The questions Edwards taught them to ask, and the answers he taught them in *Freedom of the Will* to give, pricked the very heart of the New England self-conception. Calvinists who might otherwise have welcomed the prospect of such a mind as Edwards's wrestling with the Arminians now found that Edwards's way of talking about free will cut them down as freely as it did the Arminians. For that reason, the real struggle created by *Freedom of the Will* in American thought has next to nothing to do with the Arminians (and so people like the Methodists occupy a space in this work appropriate to that role); instead, it becomes a scramble in which American Calvinists try to find some other way of talking about Calvinism, before the apostles of *Freedom of the Will* destroy them. In the end, they found an answer in Nathaniel William Taylor; but whether his answer satisfied the question, or merely the questioners, remains another subject.

Because he was dealing with the most fundamental idea of his community, Jonathan Edwards used *Freedom of the Will* to give reason to his own ideal of human community. Like so many other New England theologians, he could not escape a measure of ambivalence: the same wills that made an awakened Northampton, Massachusetts, sing in four-part harmony could turn and destroy him in a strident chorus of denunciation, and he had in the end to admit that he could speak of a necessary result to human choice only in a very qualified sense. His was not a complete triumph. But his was not a complete loss, either. *Freedom of the Will*, the deacon's masterpiece of Oliver Wendell Holmes,

the wonderful one-hoss shay,
That was built in such a logical way
It ran a hundred years to a day. . . .

did not fall apart on the anniversary of Lisbon earthquake day, after all. It remains a necessary document of American uniqueness.

Since so much of this discussion occurs in the context of Christian theology, it would be well to clarify here that, in the minds of the participants in this particular discourse, it was human will after the Fall of Adam, *as a sinner*, that was the object of interest. There is, of course, a substantial literature on the nature and function of Adam's will prior to the Fall, but, except where I have specifically indicated it, the subject under examination by Edwards and his followers and his critics is the human will as it now is.

The opening chapters of this book concentrate on Edwards's personal involvement with the question of free will and give a particular analysis of *Freedom of the Will*. This is followed by an overview of how Edwards's disciples, the New Divinity Men, took *Freedom of the Will* as a sort of *cantus firmus* for their Calvinism, and used and applied it against the peculiarities of New England's church-in-society. Attention then turns to the Old Calvinists of New England to discuss their rage and panic when confronted with the challenges of Edwardsean theory and New Divinity practice; and then to the Presbyterians of the Middle Atlantic region, who seemed natural opponents but among whom Edwards's views found some ardent disciples. The last chapters introduce the figure of Nathaniel William Taylor, who laid the troublesome ghost of *Freedom of the Will* to rest, at least as far as the peace of mind of American theology was concerned. That by no means meant the end of the free-will debate in America; but it did signal the end of its importance as a theological question.