

Agency/Volition

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Foundational to an Edwardsian Theological Anthropology, agency and volition are crucial for understanding not only God but also humans in relation to God. Central to understanding human salvation, the affections (see *Religious Affections*, part 3 section 7), faith, and human purpose (“as benevolence to Being in general”), Edwards construes both Divine and human agency as the freedom to do what one desires and not as the freedom to do otherwise.

All agent choices are not only caused but also determined broadly speaking. For Edwards, this applies both to God and humans (see *Freedom of the Will*, part 1 section 2, part 2). Edwards rejects the theses that agent’s volitions are not determined or caused, but instead the agents are free to choose otherwise (i.e. theological libertarians). Edwards is a *global determinist* meaning that all created and non-created agent actions or events are caused by the agent’s desires/affections and ultimately determined by God. Divine volitions are no less free than human volitions, yet all physical events and human choices are not only dependent upon the Divine mind but determined as Divine ideas, which leads to two theses important for understanding Edwardsian agency. First, he is committed to Idealistic Immaterialism and a rejection of materialist ontology. Second, he is committed to Radical Theo-centrism and human responsibility.

Consider first Edwards’ rejection of materialist ontology and affirmation of Divine idealism. Edwards believed all actions are reducible to or dependent upon minds (i.e. idealism). Having said this, in some sense all human minds are dependent upon the Divine mind. This understanding is important for understanding Edwards’s view of agency in two ways. First, Edwards does not affirm that material substances exist independently, hence his commitment to rule out materialism and material determinism. Additionally, his understanding of determinism is that human action (along with everything else) is dependent upon the Divine mind.

Second, Edwards is committed to the notion that the world is radically God-centered (given that God is the only true substance), yet humans are responsible agents. On the surface, this seems intuitively in tension. However, one can make sense of this in terms of Edwards’s commitment to the world’s necessarily being determined by God’s mind, yet with respect to human agentive actions God’s determination should not be construed according to physical like causality or mathematical laws (e.g., $1+1=2$). Instead, Edwards distinguishes between natural and moral ability to make sense of necessitarianism (see *Freedom of the Will*, part 1 section 4 and 5), God’s determinism, and human agency.

Edwards believes that the natural and moral distinction sustains both and allows for a radically personal universe. Human agents bear the property of natural ability in the sense that the will is unfettered by external constraint and that humans have natural power to choose otherwise. However, human moral ability implies that human ability is limited by his/her desires in the sense that humans are morally incapable of doing good, and this is in keeping with the liberty of spontaneity. Philosophically, then, Edwards is a compatibilist in that he affirms both human responsibility in terms of man's natural ability and Divine determination concerning all events including human choices (semi-compatibilism may apply to Edwards's view, namely, the position of agnosticism toward free will in relation to determinism, yet the belief that moral responsibility is compatible with determinism). As such, some additional component is required for humans to exhibit true freedom (namely, God-self). Assuming that additional component in the Edwardsian sense means to have the right moral desires or the appropriate 'sense', which *moves* the volition.

Some important contemporary questions emerge in this context. First, to what extent does Edwards draw from and depart from his Reformed forebearers who often assumed an Aristotelian view of agency? As stated above, Edwards assumes an Aristotelian human substance weakly construed as mental property-bearers where ideas are the determiners of volitional acts. Furthermore, Edwards affirms not only efficient causality (as some contemporaries assume), but also formal and final causality (following from his view that humans are minds with purposeful intention). Second, a recent question has emerged in Edwardsian studies concerning the notion of the liberty of indifference and whether Edwards assumes a liberty of indifference in any sense (e.g., contingency etc.). For this discussion, see Richard Muller's "Jonathan Edwards and the Absence of Free Choice", and Paul Helm's "Jonathan Edwards and the Parting of ways".

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