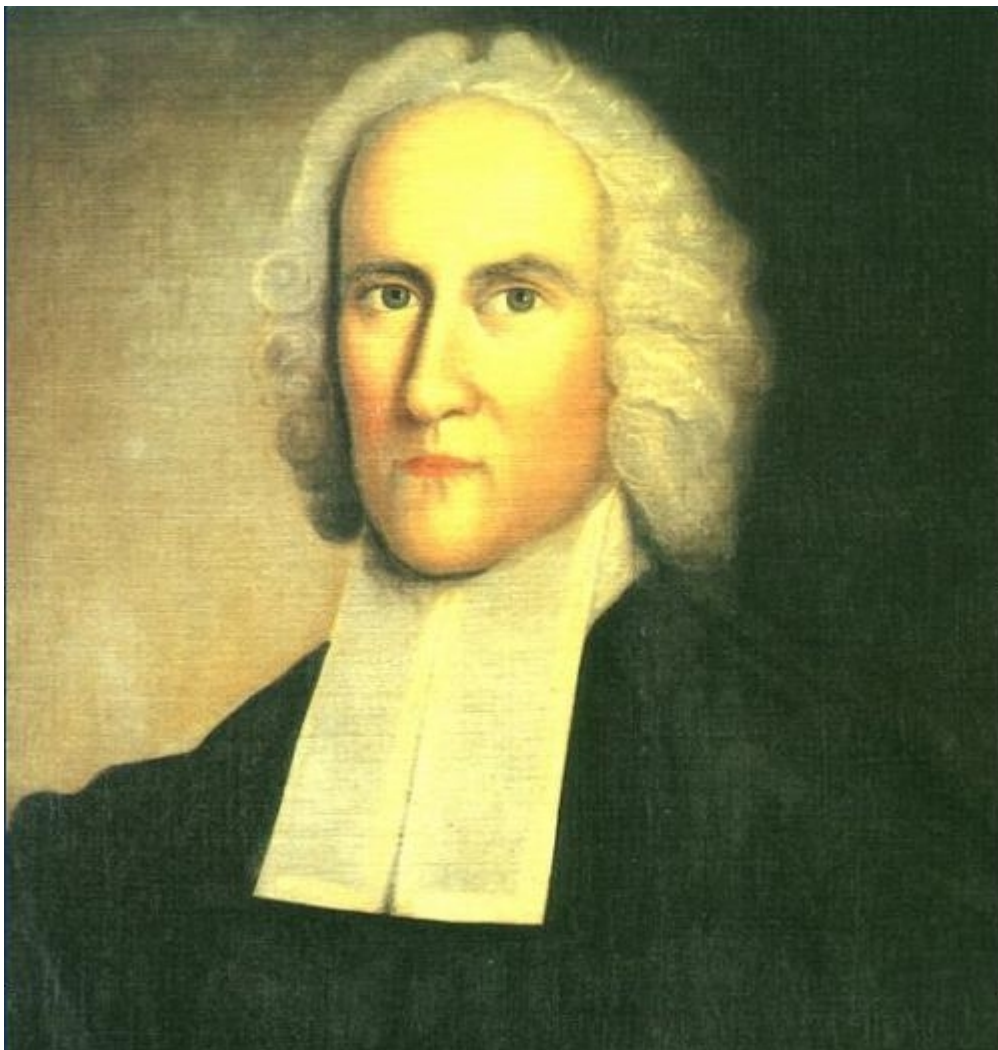


Reply to Jonathan Edwards's Treatise on the Will (Fr. John Whiteford)

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First of all, Edwards' treatise seems to me to have more to do with John Locke, than it does with the view of the will found in the Bible. John Locke was a great thinker, but was essentially a theistic empiricist. His views on human psychology seek to apply the principles of physics to psychology — a move that is certainly open to question. For example, Locke said that ideas are either complex or simple. Complex ideas are formed from simple ideas — so for example, our idea of «Apple» is based on the linking of the simple ideas of sphere, red, sweet, etc. Thus a

complex idea is like a compound formed from several more basic elements. The problem is, it is far more likely that we first have the idea of apple, and only later begin to note its particulars as we ponder them — we note the apple is round, we note that it is sweet, we note that it is red.

Here is the most basic assumption of Edwards' treatise:

With respect to the grand inquiry, «what determines the will?» ...It is sufficient to my present purpose to say, it is that motive which, as it stands in view of the mind, is the strongest, that determines the will. (Part 1, section 2)

The problem with this is it makes the will little more than a «motive thermometer,» — but not a power of choice. Edwards' view makes the will a passive weather vane that will point in whatever direction the wind blows.

Furthermore, if the will works this way, it would be no less true in the case of Adam prior to the fall — thus Adam's fall is the result of him having greater motivations presented to him to sin, than to not sin. Thus, God having set the stage, obviously set him up to fall. But Adam was not a bad tree — until he chose to bear bad fruit. Edwards does not address the question of how Adam's choice to sin was made, given that he had no bent towards evil:

Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man to be upright; but they have sought out many inventions. (Eccl 7:29)

How could Adam's will be free if it was simply determined by the strongest motivation presented to him? In his case, one cannot say that he had any bent towards evil. Either he was the victim of being presented with stronger motives for evil than for good — or else he evaluated the motives present and chose to place greater value on the evil than the good.

Also, when the Bible says that no temptation will come upon us that God will not provide the means of escape — God knowing how our will functions would have to provide the strongest motives for us to not fall into temptations, for this to have meaning. And yet, believers do at times fall into temptations — and the reason cannot be simply because God did not provide the means of escape.

Did God promise David that he would always provide him the means to escape counting the people when tempted to do so? Did God promise unbelievers that they would not be deluded by the beast in the last days? No. But he did promise believers that he would always provide them the means to escape sin — and yet they manifestly do not always escape sin. Thus either God has simply failed to

provide the strongest motives for good, or the will does not work the way Edwards and Calvinists suggest that it does.

Furthermore, if this is how «will» functions, in what way is this not also applicable to God's will? Man, is after all created in the image of God, and though he is circumscribed, he nonetheless has attributes that in a limited way reflect God's. Most notably, man is a moral agent. Also man has creative abilities, though obviously of a limited nature. Man also has the power to will, though not an unlimited power to will. Man can evaluate, choose to value some things, and devalue others. Man can open his heart to something, man can also harden his heart — «today, if you will hear His voice, harden not your hearts...»

Edwards presents two alternatives — either man's will is wholly the product of motives, or man's will is wholly «uncaused.» He does not deal with the mediating possibility that man can evaluate motives, and ascribe value to some of them, and less value to others.

The problem is, why is it that people who are presented with identical circumstances do not respond in identical ways? Why do some pagans manage to not kill their babies when presented with an «unwanted» pregnancy, and others do kill them? The answer is that some value the lives of their children more than their personal convenience, and others do not. The will determines — it is not determined by — the strongest motivation. We evaluate. We place value on some things and devalue other things. Thus, some kill their babies in a pinch, and some do not under the similar circumstances.

Reading the logic of Edwards' argumentation, reminded me of a problem we discussed in my philosophy class posed by Greek philosophers. How can a spear reach its target? Before it can reach its target, it must first travel half that distance, but before it can reach half way, it must first travel half of that distance — and so on, ad infinitum. And so, since there is no limit to half way points, the argument suggests that the Spear cannot reach its target. The problem here is that this way of looking at the problem leaves out important factors to consider (such as speed, and time, rather than simply distance alone). But even if an ignorant man was posed with this problem, and did not know how to answer it — he would already know that it was fallacious, because in reality, we all know that you'd better get out of the way of flying spears.

Whether one could put their finger on Edwards' error or not, we all are instinctively aware of our power to evaluate, and value or devalue motives. We know that we can choose to listen to something, or not to listen. We know that we had better

choose to obey God too — just like we know to get out of the way of flying spears. Why can we not say that we evaluate motivations, and therefore choose to value some motivations more than others? Some people would kill Flipper for a tuna fish sandwich. Some people would rather die than eat a tuna fish sandwich. These people each choose to place greater value on opposite motivations.

I maintain that we cannot explain the will in any precise way — because God alone knows the human heart. I am not attempting to define how the will works precisely, only to argue what it is not. It is not a weather vane, blown about by quantifiable motives. If it were, than man is not responsible — only one who causes such motives or designed the weather vane could be responsible.

Man is also not free from external influences, nor is he necessarily free in his fallen state from a bent towards sin. But the will as God created it in Adam was free enough to have chosen either to sin or not to have sin — and was not determined by the sum total of the strongest motives present.

In the final analysis, I don't think that we are capable of so clearly defining the operations of the will as Edwards would have us think. Only God truly understands the mind and heart of man. Whether we can explain it or not, we know that the view Edwards presents is certainly not the Tradition of the Church, nor is it found in the Scriptures. If anyone would dispute that, I would like to see the will defined from Scripture remotely in the way that Edwards defines it.

By Father John Whiteford

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Re-posted here with direct permission from Fr. John Whiteford.