Jonathan Edwards and the Absence of Free Choice:
A Parting of Ways in the Reformed Tradition

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Abstract:
Jonathan Edwards, frequently identified in modern discussions of his thought as
the “greatest American theologian” and often regarded as an epitome of
Calvinism for his teaching on the freedom of will, was, in his own time and for a
century after his death, a much-debated thinker whose views had a polarizing
effect in Reformed circles. Scholars have examined the reception of his ideas in
America and have noted a rather pointed opposition both in New England and
in the American South. The reception of Edwards’ thought in Britain, however,
has received far less attention, even though it offers a rather significant
perspective on Edwards’ place in the Reformed tradition.
This lecture takes up the issue of Edwards’ reception in Britain, examining
understandings of Edwards’ doctrine of the freedom of will in two historical
contexts, the late eighteenth century and the third quarter of the nineteenth. In
the former context, Edwards’ thought was positively evaluated - surprisingly for
much the same reason - by the Unitarian, universalist, and materialist
philosopher Joseph Priestley and the orthodox Scottish Calvinist theologian,
George Hill. In the latter context, despite agreement on the pedigree of
Edwards’ thought, the Scottish Calvinist philosopher Sir William Hamilton
could identify Edwards’ views as a dangerous heresy, while the Scottish Calvinist
theologian William Cunningham could argue positively for Edwards’ place in
the Reformed confessional tradition.
By examining these two phases of the British reception of Edwards’ theology
and by noting briefly the differences between Edwards’ views on the freedom of
will and the views expressed throughout the era of Reformed orthodoxy, the
lecture points to a parting of the ways in the Reformed tradition that took place
largely in the eighteenth century.

The tendency of much recent work on Jonathan Edwards’ understanding
of the freedom of will has been to regard it as a fairly normative defense of
“Calvinistic” doctrine against its Arminian opponents. Indeed, it has been
identified as perhaps the most conclusive defense by many proponents and
opponents of the Calvinistic doctrine. In reviewing volume one of the Ramsay
edition of Edwards’ Freedom of Will, Arthur Murphy commented, “the inhumanity of this doctrine may shock us but its Calvinistic correctness is beyond reproach.” Samuel Storms, citing Benjamin B. Warfield, identifies Edwards’ doctrine as “‘standard’ Calvinism in its completeness.” Other statements to the same effect might easily be noted, even when Edwards’ theology is more clearly placed into its eighteenth-century context.¹

There have been, however, several dissenting voices, in the older scholarship on Edwards’ theory of the freedom of will, studies that connected Edwards’ argumentation with Hobbes, Locke, and Collins rather than with the older Reformed or Calvinistic tradition, notably an essay from 1879 by George Park Fisher and another from 1942 by Conrad Wright.² Beyond this older scholarly dissent, recent studies by Allen Guelzo and Sean Lucas have examined the intense controversy over Edwards’ views among self-identified Calvinists in the century and a half after the appearance of his Enquiry, primarily with reference to debates among Northern Presbyterians but also among those in the American South — and concluded that Edwards’ version of Calvinism had proved worrisome not only to Arminians but also to some fairly significant voices in the American Calvinist tradition itself.³

Little has been done, however, by way of examination of the reception of Edwards’ *Enquiry* in British circles, or, indeed, examination of precisely what this and the rather dissonant reception of Edwards in various American circles of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has to reveal about Edwards’ place in the larger Reformed tradition as it encountered and dealt with the issue of human freedom. It may therefore come as a surprise to contemporary students of Edwards’ work that the Unitarian determinist, Joseph Priestley, could offer Edwards praise for his deviation from Calvinism; George Hill, professor of divinity at St. Andrews, could identify Edwards as one of the significant developers of the philosophical aspect of Calvinist orthodoxy; those stalwart Scots Calvinist metaphysicians, Dugald Stewart and Sir William Hamilton, could declare Edwards a heretic on the basis of the Reformed confessions; and that other Calvinistic stalwart, William Cunningham, defended Edwards’ orthodoxy against Hamilton – with all four writers, nonetheless, standing in agreement concerning the philosophical antecedents of Edwards’ thought. In the present essay I propose to examine this British reception of Edwards’ work and – not deciding the issue of heresy or orthodoxy – register both the impact of determinist philosophy on British Calvinism in the wake of its reception of Edwards and, more importantly, examine the rather sharp but seldom noted parting of the ways that occurred within the Reformed or Calvinist tradition over the question of free choice and the alternative formulation, namely, the freedom of will.

1. Edwards and “Calvinism”: late eighteenth-century impressions from Joseph Priestley and George Hill. The problem of the relationship of Jonathan Edwards’ understanding of the freedom of will to the older Reformed tradition was well recognized in Edwards’ own time, as illustrated by the comments of the scientist, philosopher, and Unitarian minister, Joseph Priestley, on the one hand, and the arguments of the late eighteenth-century Scottish theologian, George Hill, on the other.

   Priestley, who had been a pupil in Doddridge’s academy and subsequently became famous as scientist, philosopher, and Unitarian universalist minister, offers a significant index to the problem of free choice and determinism in the late eighteenth century and in Calvinistic circles in particular. Priestley, himself an avowed determinist, praised Jonathan Edwards’ understanding of

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the problem of the will and then, at some length, criticized Edwards for remaining, inconsistently, a Calvinist. According to Priestley, Calvinism and its twin, Arminianism, had both failed to understand the problem of the will and had continued to claim its freedom, typically by resting their arguments on a “doctrine of indifference with respect to particular actions.” With the exception of supralapsarians, moreover, Priestley noted, none of the Calvinists had ever concluded that, prior to the fall, Adam had been “under any necessity of sinning” and had, therefore, failed to understand “the proper mechanism of the human mind, from which no volition is exempt,” even though Calvinists had also declared that human beings lack the ability of “doing what [they] please.” “The creed of the necessitarian,” Priestley averred, “is the very reverse of that of the Calvinist.”

In substantiation of this claim, Priestley traced the origins of philosophical determinism not to Reformed or Calvinistic thought but to Hobbes, albeit with a significant antecedent in Bradwardine and a subsequent transmission by way of Lockian philosophy — although, obviously, without viewing either the sources or the newness of the doctrine as a liability!

Priestley also offered an rather pointed evaluation of Locke’s approach to human liberty. “I am rather surprised,” he wrote,

that Mr Locke, who seems to have been so much indebted to Mr. Hobbes for the clear view that he has given us of several principles of human nature, should have availed himself so little of what he might have learned from him on this subject. It is universally acknowledged that his chapter on power, in his Essay on the Human Understanding, is remarkably confused; all his general maxims being perfectly consistent with, and implying, the doctrine of necessity, and being manifestly inconsistent with the liberty which, after writing a long time exactly like a necessitarian, he attributes to man.


Fortunately, Priestley continues, “the obscurity that was thrown on this subject by Mr. Locke was effectually cleared up by Mr. Collins, in his *Philosophical Inquiry concerning Human Liberty*, published in 1717.”

One of Priestley’s opponents in the debate over freedom and necessity, William Cockin, agreed with Priestley’s assessment of the newness of such determinism, similarly tracing it back to its origins in the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes and indicating that, to his knowledge, this was the point at which “Christian philosophers first ventured to *start* objections to the free-agency of man on the *inherent* principles of the Will.” Cockin also argued that the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination (which he, by the way, abhorred) was distinct from the philosophical doctrine of necessity, inasmuch as it premised a basic freedom of human agency and denied only the ability of human beings to “procure final salvation” while the doctrine of necessity denied all possibility of contrary choice and asserted the predetermination of all events in a human life.

Priestly recognized that, in his own time, several Calvinists had seen the light and abandoned their traditional position:

> The doctrine of philosophical necessity is, in reality, a modern thing.... Of the Calvinists, I believe Mr Jonathan Edwards to be the first. Others have followed in his steps, especially Mr. Toplady. But the inconsistency of his scheme with what is properly called Calvinism, appears by his dropping several of the essential parts of that system, and his silence with respect to others. ... More attention to the principles of the necessitarian scheme cannot fail to draw him, and all philosophizing Calvinists, farther and farther from that system....

Priestley regarded it as a “piece of artifice in Mr Edwards to represent the doctrine of philosophical necessity as being the same thing with Calvinism, and the doctrine of philosophical liberty as the same thing with Arminianism,”


given that “both Arminians and Calvinists had certainly the very same opinion concerning the freedom of the human will in general.”

Apart from the problem of identifying Edwards’ teaching with Calvinism, Priestley indicated that he would recommend ... Mr. Jonathan Edwards’s treatise on free will. This writer discusses the subject with great clearness and judgment, obviating every shadow of objection to it; and, in my opinion, his work is unanswerable. But the concurrence of the philosophical doctrine of necessity with the gloomy notions of Calvin appears to me a strange kind of phenomenon; and I cannot help thinking that had this ingenious writer lived a little longer, and reflected on the natural connection and tendency of his sentiments, as explained in his treatise, he could not but have seen things in a very different light, and have been sensible that his philosophy was much more nearly allied to Socinianism than to Calvinism.

In Priestley’s view, the lengthy controversy between Calvinists and Arminians had finally led some of the Calvinists to recognize that their grounding of salvation entirely on “an arbitrary decree of God” stood in contradiction to their views on free will — with Edwards concluding, as “no other Calvinist did before,” that the doctrine of necessity was ultimately true.

An alternative voice on the relationship of philosophical necessity to Calvinism that presented much the same view of Jonathan Edwards’ teaching can be found in the lectures of George Hill (1750-1819), professor of divinity and principal of St. Mary’s College, St. Andrews. In words echoing Samuel Horsley and, more distantly, Joseph Priestley, Hill noted that “it has happened that many Calvinists in former times, with gloomy notions of the Deity, with a slender knowledge of philosophy, and with much animosity toward their adversaries, have exhibited their system in a dress very little fitted to recommend it to the world.” In his own “more enlightened and polished age,” however, “the asperity of former times” is set aside and “Calvinism has

15. Priestley, Examination of Dr. Reid’s Enquiry, pp. xvii.
16. Priestley, Examination of Dr. Reid’s Enquiry, pp. xvi-xvii; my thanks to David Sytsma for alerting me to this reference. Cf. Cockin, Freedom of Human Action, p. xviii, also citing Edwards.
17. Priestley, Examination of Dr. Reid’s Enquiry, p. xviii.
formed an alliance with philosophy.”

The credit for this philosophical development, Hill accorded not to Hobbes, Locke, and Collins — certainly not to Priestley! — but to Leibniz, whose philosophy “illustrated and established the doctrine of philosophical necessity, or the perfect consistency of the freedom of a moral agent with the infallible determination of his conduct, which is the foundation of Calvinism.”

After Leibniz, Christian Wolff carried forward this system of philosophical necessity and Israel Gottlieb Canz demonstrated the applicability of the Leibniz-Wolffian philosophy to theology. Resting on this work of several Lutheran philosophers, Hill continues, “several systems of theology, written in the course of the eighteenth century, by divines of the Reformed churches on the Continent, as Wyttenbach, and Stapfer, and by Edwards in America, have applied the philosophy of Leibnitz and Wolfius to explain and vindicate the doctrines of Calvin.”

There are several significant but illuminating differences and commonalities between Priestley’s and Hill’s accounts. Two differences stand out. First, they offer different historical pedigrees for determinism: Priestley traces out a line of argument in British thought from Hobbes through Locke to Edwards while Hill looks to the continent and to Lutheran thinkers, Leibniz, Wolff, and Canz, who influenced the development of continental Reformed thought as well. If the issue underlying these comments were a purely historical one, Priestley’s account would certainly be closer to the


19. Hill, *Lectures in Divinity*, p. 599; although Hill does, elsewhere note the common ground of Edwards with Locke in recognition of the fact that “liberty belongs to an agent, not to a faculty” and that it consists in being able to act without constraint (ibid., p. 551).

truth, but the issue was more one of pedigree, with Priestley identifying the line of thought leading to his own philosophy and Hill identifying the line of development, leaving out the notorious Thomas Hobbes, that would be more acceptable among Protestant theologians. This different lining out of the pedigree of Edwards’ determinism relates to the second difference — Priestley saw Edwards as departing from Calvinism, Hill viewed him as standing with Wyttenbach and Stapfer in providing a new and sounder philosophical footing for Reformed theology.

The commonalities between Priestley and Hill (not to mention Cockin) are equally significant. From very different vantage points, each held that there had been a major philosophical shift in Protestant thought and that the shift was illustrated prominently by the work of Jonathan Edwards. Hill (much like Horsley) identified the older Reformed theology as philosophically inept. Priestley and Cockin recognized that the older Reformed theology had argued the freedom of the will with a limitation of choice, an approach that Priestley at least viewed as inept — Edwards, by contrast, had denied the freedom of the will in its choosing. Or, to pose the issue in another way, whereas Edwards’ assumptions about human inability in sin and the necessity of grace were surely Reformed, the clear antecedents of Edwards’ determinism were not in the Reformed tradition. The older Reformed tradition, even as it emerged in the eighteenth century, had consistently argued free choice to consist not merely in spontaneity but also in freedom of contrariety and contradiction and, when explicit in such matters, has distanced itself from Lockian definitions of the will and its freedom. Hill bypassed this issue, whereas Priestley addressed it directly with, of course, a positive nod in his own direction. After all, he had been a product of Doddridge’s Calvinistic academy who had gone on to better things.

2. Edwards and the traditional language of free will. Some direct comment on Edwards’ position is needed here before we pass on to the issue of the later reception of is thought. As recognized by Priestley and Hill, Edwards was one of the thinkers who made the transition between a traditional Reformed theology and a form of philosophical determinism. The shift toward determinism can be seen in the contrast between his approach to necessity in his response to Whitby and the response given earlier by his near-namesake John Edwards as well as the nearly contemporaneous response from John Gill. 22 Whereas John Edwards and John Gill retained the basic terms of the traditional debate, namely, the limited and dependent freedom of the will and the problem of choice, 23 Jonathan Edwards shifted the ground of the theological discussion first by affirming the rationalist argument, earlier found in Hobbes and Locke, that the real issue was not the freedom of will but of the person, and second by departing from the Reformed assumption of the freedom of the will, in conjunction with the intellect, to choose freely according to its nature and arguing the determination of the will itself. 24 Much


of the shift in Edwards’ thinking, moreover, can be illustrated by his alteration of language — notably, the alteration of language of cause, necessity, and contingency and by his shift from language of *liberum arbitrium* or free choice to language typically not of “freedom of the will” but of “freedom of will.”

As might be inferred from his views on God, substance, and finite beings, Edwards did not leave room for contingency in the world order, viewing it as a necessary sequence of causes, and also denied contingency in acts of the human will. Indeed, Edwards’ argumentation marks its departure from traditional Reformed thought in its conscious introduction of language of “Philosophical Necessity,” defined by Edwards as “Nothing else than the full and fix’d Connection between the Things signified by the Subject & Predicate of a Proposition, which affirms Something to be true.”

Since nothing can occur without a cause and since there must be a fixed connection between cause and effect, Edwards rules out contingency — specifically as if a contingency were to be defined as something lacking a cause or reason for existing. This argumentation is very different from the approach of the older Reformed tradition where contingencies were defined not as things lacking cause but as things that could be otherwise.

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There is also a fundamental divergence from the Reformed tradition in the direction of Locke and Collins in Edwards’ definition of will and choice. In Edwards’ view,

the Will (without any metaphysical Refining) is, That by which the Mind chuses any Thing. The Faculty of the Will, is that Faculty or Power, or Principle of Mind, by which it is capable of chusing: an Act of Will is the same as an Act of Chusing or Choice. ... it is that by which the Soul either chuses or refuses ... for every Act of Will whatsoever, the Mind chuses one Thing rather than another; it [chuses] something rather than the Contrary or rather than the Want or Non-Existence of that Thing.\textsuperscript{28}

What is prominent in Edwards’ definition is his identification of will with “mind” or “soul” and specifically as mind or soul in its act of choosing. He has, following Locke, evacuated the traditional distinction between intellect and will as separate faculties and the consequent distinction resident in the tradition between the acts of will and intellect in their conjoint act of choosing freely.\textsuperscript{29} Evacuation of the distinction between will and choice enables Edwards, as one of his critics commented to, treat “it as a settled point, that by determining the will must be intended, not causing volition to be one way rather than another, but causing it to come into existence.”\textsuperscript{30}

Edwards moves to deny volitional contingency, having identified it as a primary tenet of Arminianism:

‘Tis a Thing chiefly insisted on by Arminians, in this Controversy, as a Thing most important and essential in human Liberty, that Volitions, or the Acts of the Will, are contingent Events; understanding Contingence as opposite, not only to Constraint, but to all Necessity. ... And, 1. I would inquire, whether there is, or can be any such Thing, as a Volition which is contingent in such a Sense, as not only to come to pass without any Necessity

\textsuperscript{28} Edwards, Freedom of Will, I.1 (pp. 1-2)


of Constraint or Co-action, but also without a Necessity of Consequence, or an infallible Connection with any Thing foregoing.\footnote{Edwards, \textit{Freedom of Will}, II.8 (p. 73).}

Edwards, it should be noted, appears to confuse \textit{necessitas consequentiae} with \textit{necessitas consequentis}: he uses the former term but clearly means the latter — specifically, he insists that effects occur by necessity, given the “infallible Connection” between cause and effect.\footnote{Thus also, Edwards, \textit{Freedom of Will}, I.3 (p. 18).} Edwards has also defined Arminianism in such a way as to include most of the major exponents of the Reformed tradition in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, namely, as those who assume that acts of the will are contingent and that the will has both freedom of contradiction and freedom of contrariety!

In Edwards\textsuperscript{\textdagger} view, quite to the contrary of the older Reformed tradition, volitions are to be explained with the same language of necessity as physical events:

it has been already shewn, that Nothing can ever come to pass without a Cause, or Reason, why it exists in this Manner rather than another; and the Evidence of this has been particularly applied to the Acts of the Will. Now if this be so, it will demonstrably follow, that the Acts of the Will are never contingent, or without Necessity, in the Sense spoken of; inasmuch as those Things which have a Cause, or Reason of their Existence, must be connected with their Cause.\footnote{Edwards, \textit{Freedom of Will}, II.8 (p. 73).}

Edwards makes it clear, moreover, that as far as he is concerned elements of contingency in relations nullify the notion of causality:

If there be no such Relation between one Thing and another, consisting in the Connection and Dependence of one Thing an the Influence of another, then it is certain there is no such Relation between them as is signified by the Terms \textit{Cause} and \textit{Effect}. So far as an Event is dependent on a Cause, and connected with it, so much Causality is there in the Case, and no more. The Cause does, or brings to pass, no more in any Event, than is dependent on it. If we say, the Connection and Dependence is not total, but partial, and that the Effect, tho’ it has some Connection and Dependence, yet is not entirely
dependent on it; That is the same Thing as to say, that not all that is in the Event is an Effect of that Cause, but that only Part of it arises from thence, and Part some other Way.\textsuperscript{34}

Edwards concludes, “if there be no Event without a Cause, as was proved before, then no Event whatsoever is contingent, in the Manner that Arminians suppose the Free Acts of the Will to be contingent.”\textsuperscript{35} Causes, for Edwards are necessary and can result only in necessary effects – indeed, Edwards has reversed the traditional Reformed assumption of a radically contingent world order and reduced all to necessity, with acts of will standing in no contrast either to natural or to physical necessity. His understanding of causality and necessity – is remarkably akin to that of Hume: specifically, causality is reduced to efficiency and necessity is uniformly identified as physical necessity, generated in the chain of causality.\textsuperscript{36} What has been lost is a language of causality that extends beyond efficiency and materiality to formality and finality and, in concert with that language, the assumption of levels of causality, namely, primary and secondary, each operating and interrelating in terms of their own efficiencies, formalities, and finalities. The liberty or freedom that remains lies purely and simply in the absence of coercion: when “there is Nothing in the Way to hinder his pursuing and executing his Will, the man is fully & perfectly free.”\textsuperscript{37} In short, Edwards understood the causality of the human will in much the same way that he understood efficient causality as reduced to physical necessity: there is no room for contingency, for actual choice, for liberty of contradiction. His formulations, in other words, are illustrative of the loss of or, one might say, the shift away from, in the eighteenth century, a philosophical foundation for the expression of traditional orthodoxy on issues of contingency and human freedom.

(1853) and reinforced by notes on a text of Dugald Stewart edited by Hamilton for the critical edition of Stewart’s works (1855), caused a fairly serious debate over Edwards and the issue of determinism. In Hamilton’s assessment,

The Scottish Church asserts, with equal emphasis, the doctrine of the Absolute Decrees of God and the doctrine of the Moral Liberty of Man. The theory of Jonathan Edwards touching the Bondage of the Will, is on the Calvinistic standard of the Westminster Confession, not only heterodox but heretical; and yet we have seen the scheme of Absolute Necessity urged, by imposing authority, and even received with general acquiescence, as that exclusively conformable to the recognized tenets of our Ecclesiastical Establishment.38

Hamilton’s comment stood very much in agreement with Stewart’s own conclusion that “the argument for Necessity” as “insisted on both by Collins and Edwards,” if carried forward to the point of arguing the opposition of human liberty and divine foreknowledge, would serve to “identify ... the creed of the Necessitarians with that of the Spinozists.”39 Stewart’s association of Edwards with Anthony Collins not only affirms the pedigree identified by Priestley — namely a line through Locke, back to Hobbes — but it also associates Edwards primarily with rationalism and eighteenth-century “freethought” rather than with the Reformed tradition.

Hamilton argued further that the necessitarianism then widely taught “as Calvinism ... in our Calvinistic Church of Scotland” was as far as could be conceived from Calvin’s actual teaching, implied fatalism and pantheism, and tended toward the negation of conceptions of a moral order in the universe.40 Such teachings, he indicated were “not only false in philosophy, but heretical, ignorant, suicidal in theology.”41

Hamilton’s comments elicited a rather pointed response from William Cunningham, published first as a book review and subsequently printed as an


Cunningham felt the sting of Hamilton’s claims not only because Hamilton was a highly respected Calvinistic philosopher, but also because an Edwardsian doctrine of predestination as philosophical necessity had been espoused by quite a few eminent Scottish Presbyterian divines of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Identifying Edwards as a heretic might become the basis for extending the compliment to the revered Thomas Chalmers, and probably to Cunningham himself.43

Significantly, Cunningham does not deny the rationalist pedigree of Edwards’ doctrine. Rather he affirms it, affirms the importance of the rationalist philosophers whose writings yielded the necessitarianisms of the eighteenth century and impugns Hamilton’s claims in a rather ad hominem manner:

A doctrine which has been advocated by a large proportion of the ablest and best men who have given their attention to these matters, and by some of the highest names in philosophy, by Hobbes, and Leibniz, and Locke, was surely entitled to a more respectful treatment. [Hamilton’s] conduct in this matter resembles, in all respects, that of a class of men who were, perhaps the most incompetent body of persons that ever presumed to discuss theological questions, viz. the Church of England writers of the last century who belonged to the school of Whitby, Jortin, Tomline, and Mant.44

The necessitarians in Cunninngham’s paragraph were, by the way, no proponents of Reformed or Calvinistic theology — Hobbes was a materialist of no specific confessional persuasion, Leibniz a confessional Lutheran, and Locke of more or less Arminian persuasion — and the opponents of necessitarianism, Whitby, Jortin, Tomline, and Mant, purportedly allied to

42. William Cunningham, “Sir William Hamilton on Philosophical Necessity and the Westminster Confession,” in British and Foreign Evangelical Review, 7 (1858), pp. 199-252; edited and reissued as “Calvinism, and the Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity,” in The Reformers; and the Theology of the Reformation (Edinburgh: 1862), pp. 471-524. The present essay follows examines the text of the original review which is, in several places, rather more pointed and polemical than the later essay.


Hamilton, were all Arminians. The attempt at guilt by association is perhaps understandable, but the advocacy of Hobbes, Leibniz, and Locke by a confessional Calvinist is, to say the least, a bit surprising, particularly inasmuch as it confirms Joseph Priestley’s assessment of Edwards!

Cunningham, with a view to allowing the orthodoxy of Hamilton on the one side, and affirming that of Edwards and Chalmers on the other, argued two propositions:

1st, There is nothing in the Calvinistic system of theology, or in the Westminster Confession, which precludes men from holding the doctrine of philosophical necessity. 2d, There is nothing in the Calvinistic system of theology, or in the Westminster Confession, which requires men to hold the doctrine of philosophical necessity. 45

The Westminster Confession, chapter 3, refers to the divine ordination of “whatsoever comes to pass” in such a way that “the liberty or contingency of secondary causes” is not “taken away but rather established.” All that the Confession argues is that three things, namely, divine authorship of sin, violence to the wills of creatures, and loss of liberty or contingency “do not follow from foreordination” — this and no more. Given this limitation of the confessional language, Cunningham rather remarkably claims, that the divine foreordination of everything indicated in the Confession “certainly implies that liberty, in some sense, as predicated even of men’s volitions, is excluded, and that necessity in some sense is established.” 46 Since, moreover, the Confession does not mention the doctrine of philosophical necessity, and Edwards held that his doctrine of philosophical necessity in no way implied either that God is the author of sin or that violence is offered to the will of creatures, there can be nothing (Cunningham concludes) in the confession that precludes Edwards’ doctrine. Cunningham has, for the moment, neglected the fact that the Confession affirmed contingency and Edwards denied it.

Not content simply with arguments based on the Westminster Confession, Cunningham also drew on Augustine, Calvin, and Turretin for corroboration of his arguments. What is interesting about Cunningham’s analysis of Augustine and Calvin is that he realized that neither had examined

questions of necessitarianism or psychological determinism and that his argument was just a bit thin in enlisting them on the side of Edwards and Chalmers — and he concludes, as he would concerning the Westminster Confession, that neither Augustine’s not Calvin’s position precluded a doctrine of philosophical determinism.47

Cunningham does, however, work rather hard at finding elements of a doctrine of philosophical necessity in Turretin. Quite rightly, he identifies Turretin’s denial of indifference as the basis of freedom and indicates that Turretin identified several different kinds of necessity that are “not inconsistent with the natural liberty of the will or with moral agency,” notably the necessity of human dependence on God and the necessity of the will following the intellect’s and its own determination to a particular object.48 In Cunningham’s view, Turretin establishes his reading of the Westminster Confession, namely, that “determination of the will by an absolute necessity of nature does not, any more than the repudiation of determination by force, preclude the maintenance of the doctrine of philosophical necessity.”

In these arguments, Cunningham cited Turretin’s discussion of providential causality and his discussion of the freedom remaining to human beings after the fall, where Turretin explains how human liberty remains within the confines of a sinful nature. What he did not cite was Turretin’s subsequent discussion of the formal basis of free choice. There, Turretin is quite clear that the will, considered absolutely or simply, in its primary actuality, is free not merely because it is spontaneous and uncoerced but also because it has a root indifference prior to its act of willing and, given that root indifference, it has both freedom of contrariety and freedom of contradiction.49

Cunningham was, then, unable to draw a clear line from the formulations of Calvin, Turretin, or the Westminster divines to Edwards’ doctrine of the freedom of will, although he argued mightily that the traditional orthodoxy and its confessions, including their language of contingency and freedom, did not precisely rule out a properly “Calvinistic” philosophical determinism.


49. Turretin, Inst. theol. elencticae, VIII.i.8; X.iii.4, 12.
Understandably, his response to Hamilton did settle the issue of Edward’s theology and its relation to the older Reformed confessional tradition. In the same year of the *British and Foreign Evangelical Review*, a substantial anonymous commentary on Edwards and the New England theology appeared, much in line with Hamilton’s critique, highlighting Edwards’ determinism, identifying its affinities with pantheism, and questioning its orthodoxy.50

4. Some conclusions.

As noted in passing toward the beginning of this essay, the question of Edwards’ orthodoxy or heterodoxy is not one to be resolved here — what can be resolved, however, is the issue of the relationship of Edwards’ theory of the will both to the older Reformed orthodoxy of the seventeenth century and to what must only be called, given the lack of precision available in such matters following on the deconfessionalization that took place in the early eighteenth century, the various orthodoxies of later so-called “Calvinism.” Edwards’ resolution of the problem of free will, given the rootage of his assumptions concerning faculties and powers and of his definitions of will and freedom in the rationalist tradition of Hobbes, Locke, and Collins, stands in marked contrast to the resolution found among Reformed orthodox writers like Gijsbert Voetius, Francis Turretin, and indeed, Edwards’ own favorite theologian, Petrus van Mastricht. His resolution of the problem stands, however, in one of the patterns of expression characteristic of Calvinistic theology beginning in the mid- to late eighteenth century and continuing through the nineteenth century, albeit not without controversy, as noted in the thought of George Hill, Thomas Chalmers, and William Cunningham.

Among the differences between Edwards’ views on freedom and those of the earlier Reformed tradition, perhaps the primary point concerns the basic language of freedom itself. Whereas the older tradition consistently presented the problem in terms of free choice or *liberum arbitrium*, understood as the interactive act of intellect and will, Edwards presented the issue in terms of freedom of will and grounded the issue in the will itself without reference to the arbitrative function of intellect. In other words, the older Reformed theology followed a traditional faculty psychology whereas Edwards did not. The older tradition understood that there had to be a root indifference prior to the engagement of will and intellect, defined by the potency of the will to

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multiple effects and characterized by freedom of contradiction and contrariety, in order for there to be freedom of choice — Edwards’ formulation not only denies these points, it associates them with Arminianism.

The shift in language and understanding between the older Reformed orthodoxy and the teachings of Edwards was identified by both proponents and opponents of his views, as was the background of Edwards’ philosophy of will in the rationalist tradition of Hobbes and Locke. The background to this shift, in parallel with the shift that took place on the continent in thinkers like Wyttenbach and Stapfer, was registered with clarity in George Hill’s assessment of the importance of the new determinism to Calvinist theology: whether or not one accepts Hill’s assessment of the philosophical ineptitude of the seventeenth-century orthodoxy, it is certainly the case that their modified Aristotelianism and even the modified Cartesian philosophy of some of the last representatives of high orthodoxy seemed utterly inadequate in the philosophical milieu of the mid-eighteenth century. The older language of primary and secondary causality, of formal and final causality, of necessity and contingency, and of free choice as a species of contingency had been replaced.

The issue of Edwards’ heresy or orthodoxy is not one that a historian can answer, given the absence of any synodical decision on the matter and given the adoption of Edwardsian views by various orthodox Reformed or Calvinistic writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. What can be said from a historical perspective (and to my mind the far more important issue) is that Edwards’ views are not consonant with the Reformed positions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, whether one looks to Calvin or to Turretin or to the Westminster standards — and that, despite this lack of consonance, indeed, despite the acknowledged background of his thought in Hobbes and Locke, his views on the freedom of will were absorbed (I hesitate to say, hook, line, and sinker) by one branch of the Reformed tradition.

It is, then, to Edwards and to those who followed him in this path, as well as to the Wolffian Reformed thinkers on the continent, that Reformed theology owes much of its reputation for being a form of determinism or compatibilism, rather than to the theologians from the time of Calvin to the time of Turretin and van Mastricht who have typically been viewed as the arbiters of Reformed orthodoxy. In short, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship that tended to characterize the entire older Reformed tradition as a form of predestinarian metaphysic not only rested its claims on the work of nineteenth-century theologians like Alexander Schweizer but also, probably with Schweizer, viewed the tradition primarily through the
glass of then rather recent developments in the tradition, namely, the eighteenth-century rise of Calvinistic philosophical determinism.