

JONATHAN EDWARDS'S MORAL NECESSITY,
OR HOW TO DEFEND CALVINISM IN
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY NEW ENGLAND

JONATHAN Edwards's *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* is regarded as "the most elaborate treatise on the subject written in the eighteenth century."¹ As an outstanding nineteenth century critic would say: "There is no work of higher authority among those who deny the self-determining power of the will; and none which on this subject has called forth more general admiration for acuteness of thought and logical subtlety." We are told that at no time for a century and a half from its first publication in 1754 did more than fifteen years elapse between separate editions.²

As Norman Fiering has pointed out in his learned study about the intellectual context of Edwards's thought, the distinction between natural and moral necessity is "absolutely essential" to Edwards's defense of moral merit and demerit in a determinist system.³ While he refutes the "Arminian" liberty of indifference, Edwards is far from claiming that human freedom is a mere illusion; that is the issue at stake in his dispute with the Humean Lord Kames.⁴ Rather he is urging a kind of necessity which he is convinced is fully compatible with freedom: that is, "moral" necessity. I should like to make some historical comments on this Edwardsian way of defending strong Calvinism.

Edwards's notion of "moral necessity"

At the very outset, Edwards declares how the phrase "moral necessity" is and is not to be understood.⁵

1) It is not to be understood in its deontic meaning ("moral obligation"), the meaning that prevails, e.g., in 18th-century Germany.⁶

2) It is not to be understood as that high degree of probability, practical life might rely on to exclude the happening of an opposite event. This meaning of "moral necessity" had been promoted, e.g., by Fénelon and the later Samuel Clarke.⁷

3) It is to be understood as the connection between a certain cause, the strength of motives or inclination, and a certain effect, called volition. "The effect may be as perfectly connected with its moral cause, as a naturally necessary effect is with its natural cause."⁸

In endorsing this third notion of “moral necessity” Edwards has made his choice among already existing options: “The phrase ‘moral necessity’ is used variously.” So one might wonder into which tradition Edwards himself enters by using “moral necessity” this way.

First of all, there *must* have been a tradition, since Edwards distinguishes his own use from a commonplace. He takes it for granted that this third notion applies to *some* cases at least. When he himself employs this commonplace, he inserts the following footnote:

“ ’Tis here argued, on supposition that not all propensity implies moral necessity, but only some very high degrees; which none will deny.”⁹

Examples for such high-level-moral-necessities are given, when the opposite notion, called “moral inability,” is explained:

“A woman of great honor and chastity may have a moral inability to prostitute herself to her slave. A child of great love and duty to his parents, may be unable to be willing to kill his father. A very lascivious man, in case of certain opportunities and temptations, and in the absence of such and such restraints, may be unable to forbear gratifying his lust.”¹⁰

“*May be*” — for you may conceive circumstances which would cancel even this strong negative propensity. “Moral necessity” thus means a strong propensity to do something, *if* there are actual circumstances fit to reinforce this propensity.

For Edwards, however, “moral necessity” has a much broader scope than just these acts, in fact it has the broadest extension possible:

¹Norman Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought and Its British Context* (Chapel Hill 1981), 262.

²M.A. Noll, “Jonathan Edwards and Nineteenth-Century Theology,” in *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience*, ed. N.O. Hatch / H.S. Stout (New York-Oxford 1988), 260–87.

³Fiering, *Moral Thought* . . . , 304. Cf. P. Ramsey, “Editor’s Introduction,” in *J. Edwards: Freedom of the Will*, ed. P. Ramsey. (New Haven 1957), 37: “a cardinal point.”

⁴J. Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 443–65.

⁵*Ibid.*, 156 ff.

⁶Cf. C.A. Crusius, *Entwurf der notwendigen Vernunftwahrheiten, wiefern sie den zufälligen entgegengesetzt werden* (Leipzig 1745 / Repr. 1964), 212 ff.; I. Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*. Ak.-Ausg. V, 81; *Metaphysik der Sitten*. Ak.-Ausg. VI, 221. 359.

⁷F. De Fénelon, *Ordonnance et instruction pastorale de Msgr. le archevêque duc de Cambrai portant condamnation d'un livre intitulé Theologia dogmatica et moralis, ad usum*

Seminarii Catalaunensis (1711). *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris 1851–52 / Repr. 1971), V, 458b. 469b; S. Clarke., “Remarks upon a Book Entitled *A Philosophical Enquiry Concerning Human Liberty*” (1717). *Works* (London 1738), IV, 725f.; *Letters concerning Liberty and Necessity* (1716–17). *Works* IV, 718.

⁸Cf. Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 157.

⁹Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 359; cf. *ibid.*, 157.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 160.

¹¹Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 307; cf. “. . . it has been proved, that nothing in the state or acts of the will of man is contingent; but that on the contrary, every event of this kind is necessary, by a moral necessity.” *ibid.*, 443.

¹²*Ibid.*, 160–1.

¹³Fiering, *Moral Thought* . . . , 304.

¹⁴S. Clarke, *A Discourse Concerning the Being and Attributes of God, the Obligations of Natural Religion, and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation*, *Works* II, 565.

“... the will, in every instance, acts by moral necessity, and is morally unable to act otherwise. . . A man is truly morally unable to choose contrary to a present inclination, which in the least degree prevails.”¹¹

In other words, the distinction between high degrees and low degrees is idle. If we act at all, we act by moral necessity. The reason is simple:

“If it be so, that the will is always determined by the strongest motive, then it must always have an inability. . . to act otherwise than it does; it not being possible, in any case, that the will should, at present, go against the motive which has now, all things considered, the greatest strength and advantage to excite and induce it.”¹²

Thus, a mechanics of motives yields Edwards’s tough notion of “moral necessity.” This should be the guide, if Edwards’s theological pedigree is to be fixed.

Where does Edwards’s moral necessity come from?

Attending to the provenance of the phrase “moral necessity,” Fiering argues for Clarke’s famous *Boyle-Lectures* of 1705 as “the probable source of the idea in Edwards’s work.”¹³ He is right insofar as there is indeed in Clarke’s work a notion of “moral necessity” that claims to be compatible with freedom.¹⁴ The reference, however, is not satisfying. Fiering himself feels uneasy, for he must concede that Edwards and Clarke, this champion of liberty of indifference, used “the very same idea for contrary purposes.” If this is so, the notion of “moral necessity” cannot be presumed to have remained unaffected by this conflict. Fiering anticipates this objection in talking about “the inherent obscurity or ambiguity in the notion of ‘moral necessity’,” thereby insinuating that the different notions they were connecting with this phrase might have been hidden to the protagonists themselves. But this seems to be unlikely too, for at least Edwards’s notion of “moral necessity” is pretty clear-cut. As we have already seen, he does not lack at all the scholastic virtue of distinguishing between the possible meanings of theoretical terms. What is more, Fiering’s historical conjecture fails to meet the highly determined features of Edwards’s notion. The Clarke paragraph he is referring to appeals just to those high-level-moral-necessities which Edwards’s “doctrine of necessity” is eager to bring down to any volition whatsoever. Clarke cannot be regarded as the source of Edwards’s *notion* of moral necessity, but at most a reference for the commonplace. Fiering’s overestimation of Clarke’s influence is due to his being fixed upon the English tradition. But since most theology was still being written in Latin, every Yale graduate in the early 18th century grew into a discourse that was far more complex than that in his vernacular language.

*Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Necessity, Or How
to Defend Calvinism in Eighteenth Century New England*
Sven K. Knebel

One feature of early modern Latin academic culture is that it pervaded not only idiomatically, but religiously segregated cultures. In the leading Christian denominations, Catholics, Lutherans and Calvinists, scholastic treatises covered the same subjects and books. To give a well known example, the fact that Suárez had been a Jesuit, did not at all diminish the success of his *Disputationes metaphysicae* in the Protestant world. So one must reckon with a Christian world culture rather than with exclusive confessional cultures. While this applies to theological issues as well, the comparative approach in studying early modern academic theology is anything but a common practice. How much remains to be done in this field of research, I hope to indicate by calling attention to some puzzling facts.

The moralization of modalities, that is the technical distinction between “physical” and “moral” possibility, had been a key issue of the post-Tridentine Catholic theology in the second half of the 16th century and during the whole 17th century. As I have pointed out elsewhere, Leibniz’s speculation about God being “morally” necessitated to elect the best, traces back to the Sevillian Jesuits, Diego Ruiz de Montoya (1562–1632) and Diego Granado (1571–1632), whose vast theological system centered around this very notion: moral necessity.¹⁵ Ruiz de Montoya and Granado established the standard account about

¹⁵S.K. Knebel: “Necessitas moralis ad optimum (I.: Zum historischen Hintergrund der Wahl der besten aller möglichen Welten. — II.: Die früheste scholastische Absage an den Optimismus. Eine unveröffentlichte Handschrift Jorge Hemelmans SJ. von 1617. — III.: Naturgesetz und Induktionsproblem in der Jesuitenscholastik während des zweiten Drittels des 17. Jhs. — IV. Repertorium zur Optimismusdiskussion im 17. Jh.).” *Studia Leibnitiana* 23 (1991) 3–24; *Theologie und Philosophie* 67 (1992) 514–35; *Studia Leibnitiana* 24 (1992) 182–215; 25 (1993) 201–08.

¹⁶Fiering, *Moral Thought* . . . , 304.

¹⁷“Quarta (sc. propositio) est, libertatem simpliciter, quae dicitur ‘libertas physica’, manere multoties integram et solutam, licet moralis indifferentia seu libertas sublata sit per moralem necessitatem, id est, efficacitatem motivorum infallibiliter inducentium ad consensum.” D. Ruiz De Montoya, SJ., *Commentarii ac Disputationes ad quaestionem XXII et bonam partem quaestionis XXIII ex prima parte S. Thomae: De providentia praedefiniente et praebente praedestinationis exordium* (Lugduni, 1631), 99b.

¹⁸“... necessitas moralis non aufert absolutam libertatem.” D. Granado, SJ., *Commentarii in primam partem Summae Theologiae S. Thomae* (Pont-à-Mousson 1624), I/II, 432. “... V.g. si viro sanctissimo revelaret Deus conversionem totius mundi pendere ex eo solum, quod ipse semel recitaret salutationem angelicam, vir iste libertatem physicam haberet ad non recitandum, quia obiectum quod proponitur, est finitae et limitatae bonitatis. . . , et tamen nemo dubitabit, quin ab illo recitaretur angelica salutatio. Merito ergo opera quae hoc modo fierent, dici solent libera physice, necessaria tamen moraliter, quia attempto modo operandi voluntatis et hominum more nunquam non fient.” *idem*, *In universam Primae Secundae S. Thomae commentarii* (Sevilla 1625), II, 377b/78a.

¹⁹“... licet causa libera excludat necessitatem physicam provenientem ab intrinseca entitate rei, nihilominus non excludit necessitatem moralem. . . , et ideo bene compatiuntur in eodem subiecto, ut adnotat communiter Theologi.” L. Peñafiel, SJ., *Tractatus et disputationes in primam partem D. Thomae*. T.2 (Lyon, 1666), 43a.

moral necessity. This is easy to see, if one compares them with Clarke some eighty years later. I quote once more Fiering:

“(Although the distinction between moral and natural necessity was not entirely new, Clarke’s formulation was original enough to make it highly likely that the *Demonstration* (sc. the *Boyle-Lectures* of 1705) was Edwards’s source. . .) . . . Moral necessity, he said, is ‘*no Necessity at all*, in the Sense of the Opposers of Liberty.’ Moral necessity is ‘consistent with the most perfect *Natural Liberty*.’ ”¹⁶

Now listen to the Spanish Jesuits. In a treatise written as early as in 1594, yet not published until 1631, Ruiz de Montoya defends the following proposition:

“Liberty taken absolutely, that is called ‘physical liberty,’ remains very often in its full integrity, even if moral indifference or liberty has been destroyed by moral necessity, that is by the efficacy of motives that infallibly induce to compliance.”¹⁷

Or, as Granado simply puts it: “Moral necessity doesn’t destroy absolute liberty.”¹⁸ Thirty years later this teaching had become the commonplace it remained up until the 18th century.

Another Jesuit teaching in Peru provides us with the following valuable testimony:

“Although to be a free cause excludes physical necessity springing from the intrinsic nature of a thing, it doesn’t exclude moral necessity. . . , and thus both are quite compatible within the same subject, as the theologians commonly assert.”¹⁹

Thus, there is nothing original in Clarke’s notion of moral necessity that would compel us to regard this author as Edwards’s source. For the same Jesuits who are usually regarded as the champions of liberty of indifference, turn out to have promoted compatibilism long ago!

You might object: Are these obscure Spanish Jesuits likely to have been accessible to a strong New England Calvinist? To be sure, were they “accessible” not only in the sense that he could have found their works in libraries, but also in the sense that it was within his mental scope and interest to have looked at them? In order to answer this question, I should like to distinguish.

First, my preliminary remark regarding the virtually unlimited scope for scholastic publications holds true especially for Ruiz de Montoya. By mid-17th century his doctrine of moral necessity had been well received in Scottish Calvinism. Thus one may find large quotations in John Strang (1584–1654), professor of theology in Glasgow, when he is dealing with the same issues later to be dealt with in Edwards’s *Freedom of the Will*.²⁰

*Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Necessity, Or How
to Defend Calvinism in Eighteenth Century New England*
Sven K. Knebel

Second, although a comparison between the Sevillian theology and that of and Edwards would be very exciting, I do not claim any direct influence. My argument, rather, is that 17th century Jesuit theology had established a new pattern for virtually all Christian denominations. We have a nice piece of evidence for this claim is in an early 18th-century testimony of Jean La Placette, a learned minister of the French Reformed Church.²¹

Third, although it is undoubtedly this pattern Edwards is following, when he introduces his notion of "moral necessity," the specific features of this notion still demand special consideration. His tough mechanics of motives taking

²⁰"... Ruiz docet aliquam necessitatem antecedentem consistere posse cum libertate: qualis est. . . necessitas seu certitudo et infallibilitas moralis, ex speciali vi et energia motivorum allicientium, et collectione circumstantiarum omnium, quibus positus eventus certissime et infallibiliter sequitur, ita ut contradictionem implicet eum non fore." J. Strang, *De voluntate et actionibus Dei circa peccatum libri IV* (Amsterdam 1657), 709; "Hinc sequitur etiam ex sententia adversariorum nihil repugnare, quin Deus praedeterminare possit voluntatem liberam morali praedeterminatione." *ibid.*, 724.

²¹"Ainsi il ne reste plus qu'à voir si cette espece de nécessité (sc. morale) peut, ou ne peut pas subsister avec la Liberté. Mais c'est là une question bien aisée à décider, ou pour mieux dire c'est une question décidée par le consentement des Philosophes et des Theologiens, qui est si unanime qu'il n'y a là dessus aucune dispute. Je puis dire au moins que je ne conois personne qui nie expressément et formellement que cette nécessité puisse subsister avec la Liberté." J. La Placette, *Eclaircissements sur quelques difficultez qui naissent de la Consideration de la liberté necessaire pour agir moralement* (Amsterdam 1709), 158. He admires Ruiz de Montoya quoting him at length (161 ff.).

²²Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 198 ff.

²³Compare I. De Sousa Ribeiro, "Autores franciscanos portugueses do século XVII (cientistas e filósofo-teólogos)," *Itinerarium*, 4 (1958) 467-77.

²⁴J. De Sousa, OFM., *Futurorum contingentium Polysophia seclusis decretis omnibus, et scientiâ mediâ, ad mentem Doctoris Subtilis* (Paris, 1680). (Microfiche of the copy in the Bibliothèque Nationale by courtesy of Thomas Hengst, Berlin.) A break in the pagination (after page 64) shows that a considerable portion of text was inserted even after

printing had been finished.

²⁵"Pro majori autem evidentia istorum submittere placuit aliqua exempla, in quibus apparet manifeste, stare multoties simul summam libertatem physicam cum summa necessitate morali. . . Potest Rex Catholicus (Louis XIV.!) potentiâ physica regnum suum plebeio renuntiare, seque illius servum ad vilissima munia constituere; sed impossibile moraliter est, quod id faciat, quia necessitatur moraliter ad oppositum per cogitationem efficacem deterrentem ab illa dementia." *ibid.*, 27.

²⁶"Petes, per quid necessitatur voluntas ad actum malum. . . ? Respondeo, quod, sicut per cogitationem bonam efficacem praedeterminatur et necessitatur moraliter ad actum bonum, ita ex opposito per malam cogitationem seu per tentationem quae gravis est in se et ita a Deo iudicatur, praedeterminatur et necessitatur moraliter ad actum malum." *ibid.*, 28.

²⁷"Petes secundo, utrum voluntas, quandoque operatur, semper operetur necessitata moraliter. . . ? Respondeo affirmative, hoc enim sibi necessario convenit, sicut necessarium est, quod habeat pro obiecto motivo bonum, quando operatur: illud enim bonum allicit et movet eam, praedeterminat et necessitat: quia sine efficaci motione non datur operatio, et efficax motio idem est ac praedeterminatio et necessitas." *ibid.*, 29.

²⁸"Dices, experiëntiâ constare, quod aliquando est voluntas sic posita in aequilibrio, quod non magis propendet ad unam partem, quam ad aliam; et tamen ac tandem amplectitur unam earum sine ulla vi aut efficacia ex parte obiecti, sed tantum se determinando, quia vult, et non quia determinetur aut alliciatur aut invitetur ab obiecto: ergo non semper operatur praedeterminata moraliter." *ibid.*, 29.

every volition to be liable to moral necessity, would not have been held by any Jesuit, since the strongest Jesuit compatibilist defended a liberty of indifference that would manifest itself in all those cases at least where there is no overwhelmingly prevailing motive. Edwards, however, gives a very sophisticated refutation of the famous argument in favour of liberty of indifference that is known as “Buridan’s Ass.”²² At this very point the roads part.

The Franciscans

Although the Jesuits in post-Tridentine Catholic theology gave the tune, there are interesting developments outside the Jesuits as well. From the Catholic point of view, one Franciscan friar would be a good candidate to supply the missing link between the standard account and Edwards’s account of moral necessity.

Jeronimo de Sousa (d. 1711) had been professor of theology at Palermo and Naples, before he showed up in Paris in 1680.²³ In his luggage he brought a nearly finished treatise which, he was convinced, contained the final solution to the problem of how God manages future contingents without doing harm to human freedom. Not only did the manuscript receive approbation from the Franciscan staff of the Sorbonne Theological Faculty still in the same summer of 1680, but it was also issued immediately.²⁴ This quite unusual hurry might give a hint that the Franciscans, who had contributed little so far to the great dispute of the age, had at last found their own position, with Sousa’s treatise being somewhat like their official statement. This position consisted in resorting neither to God’s decrees (like the Thomists) nor to Middle Knowledge (like the Jesuits), but to moral necessity.

Since moral necessity now had to account for all effects the competitors explained by their respective hypothesis, the standard account of moral necessity being confined to special cases wouldn’t do it any longer. Not surprisingly, Sousa after having stated the common features of moral necessity by means of the ordinary high-level necessities²⁵ and after having declared that it makes no difference whether we have it to do with good or evil acts,²⁶ goes on raising the crucial question: Does the will, whenever it acts, always act as morally necessitated? The question is answered in the affirmative: Necessarily the will acts as morally necessitated, because without a motive it would not act at all.²⁷

While the libertarian solution of the situation of Buridan’s Ass assured Ruiz de Montoya of the liberty of equipose, Sousa rejects this famous example.²⁸ He simply claims that the libertarian solution does not work. Obviously his assumption is that a failure in being motivated would paralyze not only a

*Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Necessity, Or How
to Defend Calvinism in Eighteenth Century New England*
Sven K. Knebel

creature that lacks free will, but man's will as well. Therefore, in a way quite similar to Edwards, he takes the case to be impossible, inasmuch as there are always prevailing motives, however imperceptible they may be.²⁹ Put in this way, the slightest surplus should be supposed to induce a moral necessity.³⁰ Sousa reasons as follows: Whenever the object has a motivating effect, there is moral necessity too. Whenever the will makes its choice, the object had a motivating effect. As a result, whenever the will makes its choice, it is morally necessitated.³¹ There is no reason to worry about this conclusion, if you once have granted there being no acts without any motive.³² Now, if there is a moral necessity, then it follows with *metaphysical* necessity (i.e., the contrary would

²⁹"Respondeo, quod adhuc in hoc casu de aequilibrio operatur voluntas necessitata moraliter. Quod si tunc non experimur magnam vim et efficaciam in allicientia et attractione obiecti, est quia non est magna in se absolute; cum quo tamen stat, quod sit magna respective ad statum et dispositionem voluntatis tunc excitatae, quod sufficit, ut eam necessitet moraliter." *ibid.*, 29.

³⁰"... quando voluntas est in aequilibrio, v.g. nec inclinata ex complexione, nec aversa cibo, sufficit minima ratio vel circumstantia, ad necessitandum illam et alliciendum ad alteram partem contradictionis amplexandam. . . Dices, quod in his casibus illa modica bonitas in obiecto sufficit quidem ad movendum et determinandum voluntatem, sed non videtur ex hoc probari, quod necessitabit eam. Respondeo: Eo ipso, quod aliquod obiectum movet efficaciter voluntatem, necessitat eam moraliter." *ibid.*, 31.

³¹"Quandocunque datur motio efficax in obiecto voluntatis, datur necessitas moralis in voluntate; sed quandocunque voluntas operatur, datur motio efficax in obiecto respectu voluntatis: ergo quandocunque voluntas operatur, semper operatur necessitata moraliter." *ibid.*, 31.

³²"Neminem ergo terreat necessitas moralis ad singulos actus nostros, quia praeterquam, quod semper stat cum indifferentia physica, ipsa in se nihil aliud est, quam efficax motio obiecti invitantis voluntatem ad illud prosequendum, si velit; sicut ergo non terret, quod quotiescunque operamur, praecedat motio efficax ab obiecto invitante et alliciente, cur timere debemus, quod quotiescunque operamur, praecedat necessitas moralis?" *ibid.*, 32.

³³"... non mirum, quod de subiecto in quo reperitur talis necessitas moralis, quale est voluntas creata, in quantum tali necessitate

affectâ et necessitatâ, dicamus convenire ei necessario necessitate metaphysicâ habere actum in omni eventu contingenter et cum potentia physica ad non habendum eum." *ibid.*, 39; "... actualis tractio voluntatis ad productionem actûs cum potentia physica ad oppositum est de essentia necessitatis moralis." 41.

³⁴"... nec... intendo, quod voluntas per necessitatem moralem sibi ab obiecto efficaciter allectivo provenientem amittat ullo modo suam physicam libertatem, seu omnimodam indifferentiam physicam ad utrumlibet. . . Immo. . . adeo verum est voluntatem nostram positâ necessitate morali et omnibus requisitis ad operandum, operari libere et contingenter et cum omnimoda indifferentia, ut hoc ipsum sit necessario verum." *ibid.*, 36–7.

³⁵Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 163–4.

³⁶Cf. "Rursus respondent, quod ad hoc, ut voluntas libera sit, et libere exequatur actum a Deo praedefinitum, abunde etiam sufficit, ut neque coacte, neque absoluta necessitate naturae ad illud unum determinantis, eum actum efficiat: quamvis cum morali necessitate proveniente ex morali determinatione per eiusmodi obiecta et circumstantias in genere moris, id est secundum consuetudinem et mores sive habitus ac dispositionem voluntatis, omnino infallibili." F. Zumel, OM., *Variarum disputationum T.2 ad Primam Secundae S. Thomae* (Lyon, 1609), 210a.

³⁷"Non, inquam, sola libertate essentiali, aut sola libertate contingentiae remota, quarum quaelibet appellatur "libertas a coactione," manet voluntas libera, ut volunt Haeretici nullam aliam libertatem agnoscentes in voluntate viatorum ad meritum et demeritum; sed etiam manet libera a necessitate, ut Catholice contra eos propugnamus." Sousa, *Polysophia*, 37.

be contradictory) that it will be acted accordingly.³³ In spite of this, claims Sousa, the act remains free. The compatibility of all he says with the freedom of the will is his constant presupposition.³⁴

Edwards's advantage

So far the Portuguese Franciscan friar and the New England Calvinist are in perfect harmony. As for the alleged principal differences between a Catholic and a Calvinist, we would be well advised to give a more deflationary account than generations of historians have been wont to do. "Calvinism," "Catholicism" don't label monads without windows. This, of course, does not mean to vaporize their differences, but we have to check in every single case to what degree observable differences are really due to diverse denominational principles.

In the present case, the difference between Sousa and Edwards can be cast only in terms of a more or less conclusive justification of why they take their account of moral necessity to be compatible with freedom. Put in this way, the Calvinist has undoubtedly an advantage over the Catholic, for the freedom he is defending is a Hobbesian freedom from compulsion.³⁵ This restriction makes things pretty easy. That such a freedom is the more suitable one from the compatibilist point of view, even the early Jesuit promoters of moral necessity would have granted, for they are said to have regarded freedom from compulsion not only as a necessary, but as the sufficient condition for a will to act freely.³⁶

This is, to be sure, not Sousa's line of argument. He utterly denies that liberty is saved by freedom from compulsion.³⁷ But when it comes to explaining, it must be admitted that he exempts himself from the burden of proof in a most frivolous way. For, ultimately, all is turning over in extreme voluntarism. Moral necessity, we are told in the appendix on page 336, doesn't spring from the object. Rather the will imposes this moral necessity upon *itself*! What in this dyadic relation called "moral necessity" springs from the object, is related to the volition not as its efficient cause, not even a partial one, but only as the occasion freely embraced by the will in order to reduce itself from potency to act. So in truth, will "predetermines" itself;³⁸ and all these "unintelligible, metaphysical phrases, as 'self-determination' and 'sovereignty of the will' " so despised by Edwards³⁹ have made a come-back.

I conclude: While Edwards cannot be credited with having invented the moral necessity type of compatibilism, yet being a Calvinist he is simply better off than his older Catholic contemporary in offering a coherent theory. We might ask: why?

*Jonathan Edwards's Moral Necessity, Or How
to Defend Calvinism in Eighteenth Century New England*
Sven K. Knebel

The shadow of heresy

Now that the difference between these kindred spirits is sufficiently specified, to resort to their denominational difference seems no longer too far-fetched an argument. In 1547 the existence of free will (the *posse dissentire*) had been declared to be a Catholic dogma. The post-Tridentine theology made it its business to tackle the consequences of this definition, the moral necessity type of compatibilism being one allowable solution of how this new premiss might be reconciled with other requirements of the Catholic faith.

Yet after the famous Five Propositions had been anathemized in 1652, while the precise scope of this new heresy labeled “Jansenism” remained to be settled during the next decades,⁴⁰ the standards for Catholic free will defense would sensibly tighten up. The range of allowable solutions would be curtailed. How risky Sousa’s commitment to moral necessity and a mechanics of motives would have been, had there not been that voluntarist turn, is best shown by the inquisitorial persecution that an incomparably tamer champion of moral necessity, Louis Habert, incurs some thirty years later.⁴¹ Although Habert defends no more than the commonplace that there are high-level-moral-necessities having always their effect, Fénelon, the Archbishop of Cambrai, leaves no stone unturned in order to get this very idea of a “moral necessity,” which works by

³⁸“Respondeo necessitatem moralem maxime esse consentaneam libertati actus, quia est necessitas, quam sibi ipsi libere imponit voluntas, et non ab alio accipit. . . . quia illud quod in proportionem illam (sc. affectivi ad allicibile vel allectum, in qua consistunt praedeterminatio et necessitas) est ab obiecto proveniens, non se habet ad actum voluntatis tanquam causa, adhuc partialis, sed solum tanquam occasio, quam libere assumit voluntas ad eliciendum suum actum, et tanquam conditio sine qua non eliceret, etiamsi posset. . . Est ipsa voluntas, quae ostendo tantum obiecto, ipsa vadit potius ad illud, quam ab eo trahatur, ipsamet voluntas se fert positā illā occasione, non ab ea fertur. Et licet in communi modo loquendi videamur dare aliquam activitatem bonitati obiecti erga voluntatem, quatenus dicimus, istam ab ea allici, trahi, praedeterminari, excitari, moveri, invitari etc., omnes tamen haec intelliguntur occasionaliter. . . . quatenus mera obiecti ostensione praesupposita, voluntas ipsa se ipsam allicit, trahit, praedeterminat, excitat, movet et invitat ad actum circa tale obiectum.” *ibid.*, 336–7.

³⁹Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 428–9.

⁴⁰The famous distinction between *quaestio*

juris and *quaestio facti*: Even if you took for granted that “Jansenism” is a heresy, you could contest that there are any Jansenists at all (including Jansenius himself).

⁴¹How was Sousa’s and the Franciscans’ proposal received in the highly charged French political atmosphere? I don’t know. To find this out would shed light upon many missing links we ought to know before we can even try to construe filiations.

⁴²Fénelon, *Ordonnance et instruction pastorale*, 455a: “Dans la première (sc. partie), nous prouverons que la nécessité *morale* du sieur Habert retombe dans la nécessité de Jansénius et même de Calvin. — Nous ne craignons pas de dire qu’il y auroit une injustice criante à condamner Calvin si on toléroit la nécessité que le sieur Habert insinue sous le nom radouci de *morale*. . . Calvin n’a jamais dit que la nécessité qui résulte de cet attrait invincible, soit *physique*. . . Il méprisoit trop ce langage pour s’y amuser. L’unique point auquel il s’arrête, comme au seul réel et décisif, est que cette nécessité soit invincible comme l’attrait qui la produit. . . Voilà précisément la nécessité que le sieur Habert nomme *morale*; Calvin la nomme *volontaire*, parce qu’elle détermine la volonté (475a/76a).”

“always” and “never,” included in the new syllabus of anathemized propositions being prepared by the Holy See and eventually issued as the bull *Unigenitus*, in 1713. To Fénelon this sort of necessity, however distinguished it is from “physical” necessity, is Troy’s Horse of Jansenism. In order to persuade the Church that there is no more urgent a business than to suppress this moral necessity, Fénelon goes so far as to argue: If moral necessity escaped the anathema, not only would “Jansenism” disappear, but, even worse, the Church would not be entitled to maintain her anathema against Calvin. For bad as he is, not even Calvin had ever pleaded for “physical” necessity.⁴²

Thus, the Edwardsian line of argument in defense of strong Calvinism is confirmed by history itself. It turns out to have been abandoned and ejected from the midst of eighteenth-century Catholicism just for being “Calvinist.”

This paper was read at the 1994 Meeting of the Jonathan Edwards Society in Kutztown, Pa. Being part of a greater project, the research has been sponsored by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. To Michael J. Murray (Franklin & Marshall College, Lancaster, Pa.) I am indebted not only for much amiable help. It is he who at first called my attention to Jonathan Edwards.

*Jonathan Edwards's Moral Necessity, Or How
to Defend Calvinism in Eighteenth Century New England*
Sven K. Knebel