An Inquiry Into the Modern Prevailing Notions Respecting That Freedom of Will Which Is Supposed to Be Essential to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Rewards and Punishment, Praise and Blame

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AN
INQUIRY
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MORAL AGENCY, VIRTUE AND VICE, REWARDS AND
PUNISHMENT, PRAISE AND BLAME.

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PART I.
WHEREIN ARE EXPLAINED AND STATED VARIOUS TERMS AND THINGS BELONGING TO THE SUBJECT OF THE ENSUING DISCOURSE.

SECTION I.
CONCERNING THE NATURE OF THE WILL.

It may possibly be thought, that there is no great need of going about to define or describe the will; this word being generally as well understood as any other words we can use to explain it; and so, perhaps, it would be, had not philosophers, metaphysicians, and polemic divines, brought the matter into obscurity by the things they have said of it. But since it is so, I think it may be of some use, and will tend to the greater clearness in the following discourse, to say a few things concerning it.

And therefore I observe, that the will (without any metaphysical refining) is plainly, that by which the mind chooses anything. The faculty of the will is that faculty or power, or principle of mind, by which it is capable of choosing; an act of the will is the same as an act of choosing or choice.

If any think it is a more perfect definition of the will to say, that, It is that by which the soul either chooses or refuses, I am content with it; though I think that it is
enough to say. It is that by which the soul chooses; for in every act of will whatsoever, the mind chooses one thing rather than another; it chooses something rather than the contrary, or rather than the want or non-existence of that thing. So, in every act of refusal, the mind chooses the absence of the thing refused; the positive and the negative are set before the mind for its choice, and it chooses the negative; and the mind’s making its choice in that case is properly the act of the will; the will’s determining between the two is a voluntary determining, but that is the same thing as making a choice. So that whatever names we call the act of the will by, choosing, refusing, approving, disapproving, liking, disliking, embracing, rejecting, determining, directing, commanding, forbidding, inclining, or being averse, a being pleased or displeased with; all may be reduced to this of choosing. For the soul to act voluntarily, is evermore to act effectively.

Mr. Locke* says, “The will signifies nothing but a power or ability to prefer or choose.” And in the foregoing page says, “The word preferrings seems best to express the act of volition;” but adds, that “it does it not precisely; for, (says he,) though a man would prefer flying to walking, yet who can say he ever wills it?” But the instance he mentions does not prove that there is anything else in willing but merely preferrings; for it should be considered what is the next and immediate object of the will, with respect to a man’s walking, or any other external action; which is, not being removed from one place to another, on the earth or through the air—these are remoter objects of preference—but such or such an im-

mediate exertion of himself. The thing nextly chosen or preferred when a man wills to walk, is, not his being removed to such a place where he would be, but such an exertion and motion of his legs and feet, etc. in order to it. And his willing such an alteration in his body in the present moment, is nothing else but his choosing or preferring such an alteration in his body at such a moment, or his liking it better than the forbearance of it. And God has so made and established the human nature, the soul being united to a body in proper state, that the soul preferring or choosing such an immediate exertion or alteration of the body, such an alteration instantaneously follows. There is nothing else in the actions of my mind, that I am conscious of while I walk, but only my preferring or choosing, through successive moments, that there should be such alterations of my external sensations and motions, together with a concurring habitual expectation that it will be so; having ever found by experience, that on such an immediate preference, such sensations and motions do actually instantaneously and constantly arise. But it is not so in the case of flying; though a man may be said remotely to choose or prefer flying, yet he does not choose or prefer, incline to, or desire, under circumstances in view, any immediate exertion of the members of his body in order to it, because he has no expectation that he should obtain the desired end by any such exertion; and he does not prefer or incline to any bodily exertion or effort under this apprehended circumstance, of its being wholly in vain. So that if we carefully distinguish the proper objects of the several acts of the will, it will not appear, by this and such like instances, that there is any difference between volition and preference; or that a man's choosing, liking
best, or being best pleased with a thing, are not the same with his willing that thing; as they seem to be according to those general and more natural motions of men, according to which language is formed. Thus, an act of the will is commonly expressed by its pleasing a man to do thus or thus; and a man doing as he wills, and doing as he pleases, are the same thing in common speech.

Mr. Locke * says, "The will is perfectly distinguished from desire, which in the very same action may have a quite contrary tendency from that which our wills set us upon. A man (says he), whom I cannot deny, may oblige me to use persuasions to another, which, at the same time I am speaking, I may wish may not prevail on him. In this case, it is plain the will and desire run counter."

I do not suppose that will and desire are words of precisely the same signification: will seems to be a word of a more general signification, extending to things present and absent. Desire respects something absent. I may prefer my present situation and posture, suppose sitting still, or having my eyes open, and so may will it. But yet I cannot think they are so entirely distinct, that they can ever be properly said to run counter. (A man never, in any instance, wills anything contrary to his desires, or desires anything contrary to his will.) The forementioned instance, which Mr. Locke produces, does not prove that he ever does. He may, on some consideration or other, will to utter speeches which have a tendency to persuade another, and still may desire that they may not persuade him; but yet his will and desire do not run counter at all; the thing which he wills, the very same he desires; and he does not will a thing, and desire the contrary, in any

* Human Understanding, vol. i. pp. 203, 204.