

## Origin of the Idea of Power (1-3)

The idea of power originates from the experience of a regularity in the change in our simple ideas

the regularity has two sides:

1. same complexes of simple ideas change in same ways

e.g. wax goes from being yellow to white

2. these changes occur in the presence of other complexes of simple ideas

e.g. the sun

The two sides of this regularity give rise to ideas of two sorts of powers

powers to undergo a change in the presence of a “cause” (passive powers)

powers to bring about a change in something (active powers)

## Origin of the idea of Active Power (4)

Our ideas of sensation are constantly changing and provide us with ample materials to derive ideas of passive powers in bodies

They also show us other bodies in the presence of which these changes occur

Nonetheless, we obtain the clearest ideas of active power from reflection

This is because all changes reduce to changes of two sorts: change in quality, that is, change in ideas and thinking; and change in place, that is, motion

insofar as we conceive of body as a cohesion of solid parts capable of transmitting motion by impulse, we find nothing in it that could account for a change in our ideas

and what we find in it that could account for a change in place is only solidity and a consequent communication of motion on impact (“impulse”)

but this is more a transfer than a beginning of motion

Our ideas of the origin of motion originate only from reflection on the consequences of our own volitions

But the will can originate motion

it has the status of an “unmoved mover”

*“we find by Experience, that barely by willing it, barely by a thought of the Mind, we can move the Parts of our Bodies” (II.xix.4)*

The will can also originate thought

*“we find in ourselves a Power to begin or forbear, continue or end several, Thought of our Minds, and Motions of our Bodies, barely by the choice or preference of our Minds” (II.xix.5)*

So because will can originate both thought and motion

whereas bodies can only be understood to transfer motions they have received to other bodies

Our ideas of active powers come through more clearly from reflection (on our acts of willing) than sensation (of external objects)

(Though if anyone claims to be able to obtain a clear idea of active power from external objects I will not quarrel with them.)

## Will (4-5)

A power to begin or forbear body motion or thought  
barely by a choice or preference

## Willing (Volition)

The exercise of this power

## Will vrs. Understanding

So the will can be contrasted with the understanding as  
the power of preferring to the power of perceiving

## Liberty / Freedom (7-13)

When action or forbearance is consequent to [and in accord with] that preference of the mind we call volition, that action or forbearance is called voluntary

To the degree that (contra Descartes) not only our thoughts but also our body motions are voluntary we are at liberty

So liberty has to do with the extent of the power of the will over the actions not only of the mind, but of the whole person

Importantly, to be free or at liberty this power has to spread both ways

in the sense that both the action and the forbearance must be equally within our power

had you willed to act you would have acted

had you instead willed to refrain you would have refrained

## Three Illustrations

### 1. Tennis ball

A tennis ball is able to either move or stay at rest

But its rest and motion are not consequent to its preference

So it is not a free agent

It is instead a necessitated agent that lacks thought, will, and volition

### 2. Man falling into the water, a bridge giving way beneath him

Motion is contrary to his preference

And he cannot rest even though he prefers not to move

So is not a free agent

He is instead a necessitated agent who has thought and will but whose action is not voluntary

### 3. Man who stays willingly in a locked room

Rest is in accord with his preference

But he would not be able to leave were he to wish to do so

So he is not a free agent

However, he is a voluntary agent

He is a necessitated agent who has thought and will and who acts voluntarily

So, volition is compatible with necessitation

Action is voluntary when it follows from and is in accord with volition

understood as exercise of the power of will to initiate thought or body motion

It is only free when the agent has the power to act either way (meaning to refrain or to act)

As a consequence, *“Voluntary then is not opposed to Necessary; but to Involuntary.”*

The will cannot properly be said to be free  
(14-16)

Liberty is not among the things that it is possible for the will to take on, any more than sleep or virtue can take on squareness

This is because will is the power to prefer or choose performing an action to forbearing, or forbearing to doing

but freedom is the power to do either what you prefer or choose to do or the opposite had you preferred or chosen the opposite

so a reference to will is involved in the definition of freedom, which makes it impossible to turn around and apply freedom to the will

The proper question (21-22)  
not: is the will free? but: is the person free?

(21) Answer #1: as long as the person is in a situation where:

- a) if they will to act the action occurs
- b) if they will to refrain from acting the action does not occur

so that the occurrence or non-occurrence of the action is a consequence of how they will

then the person is free

and their freedom extends as far as this power to act either way as a consequence of will extends

and don't think there is anything amiss in my making freedom hang on a prior act of will

because how can any be thought any freer than to be free to do as they will?

(22) And yet some people do want something more, and claim that we are not free unless we are as free to will as we are to do what we will

## Free Will

Being free to will would mean that:

- a) if you will to will then you will
- and
- b) if you will to refrain from willing then you refrain

When the definition is unpacked in this way both sides exhibit an absurdity

(23-24) Answer #2: contra (b), we are not capable of refraining from willing

we can will to refrain, but that is still willing

we cannot refrain to will

we must always will one way or another

even putting off a decision is willing to refrain for the moment

it is logically impossible to avoid constantly choosing between willing and nilling (refraining) since they are mutually exclusive

*“A Man that walks is at liberty in that respect: not because he walks, or moves; but because he can stand still if he wills it. ... But a Man that is walking, to whom it is proposed to give off walking, is not at liberty whether he will or no: he must necessarily prefer one or t’other of them; walking or not walking ... Actions in our power; they being once proposed, the Mind has not a power to act, or not to act, wherein consists Liberty ... it cannot avoid some determination concerning them, let the Consideration be as short, the Thought as quick as it will, it either leaves the Man in the state he was before thinking, or changes it ... and thereby either the continuation, or change becomes unavoidably voluntary.”*  
(II.xix.24)

(25-) Answer #3: contra (a), neither are we free which of the two, willing or nilling, that is, acting or refraining from acting, to will

That would mean willing to will or willing to nill

But I can't properly be said to will what I will (or nill)

That's because I can't be said to not not will what I will

that would be patently contradictory

Since there is no option to *not* will what you will, willing what you will must be trite

since it couldn't be any other way, adding that my willing is wilful adds nothing to just saying that my act is willed

And the same holds of nilling since it is just another form of willing (willing to refrain)

Moreover, if it were at all proper to claim that I will to will, it would produce a vicious regress

## What determines the will?

Not the desire for the greatest good

(Because people can appreciate that something is a great good but still not will it)

Rather the desire to remove the most pressing cause of uneasiness

(Great goods are not desired unless their absence makes us uneasy.)

This accounts for why people make bad choices

## A sense in which free will is possible

Contemplation of great goods can cause us to be uneasy about their absence and so alter what determines the will,

making us disposed to act in the best way

In cases where immediate action is not necessary to achieve a goal, we have a power to suspend choice in order to engage in due deliberation about what is really in our best interest.

Exercising this power gives us time to contemplate great goods

That in turn gives us a kind of freedom to put ourselves in a position where our wills are determined by uneasiness over the absence of our greatest good

rather than by uneasiness occasioned by other factors such as strong passions

Failing to exercise this power makes us morally blameworthy.

But suspending desire requires producing a change in our thoughts, and that requires the power of will.

And isn't the will supposed to be determined?

Yes, but if it is determined by uneasiness over the prospect of losing our greatest good, that will make us concerned to do what will really make us happy in the long run, and so make us hesitant and cautious in our decisions

i.e., it will determine us to want to suspend immediate action on our desires

We can cultivate uneasiness at the absence of great goods through habit and meditation

Moreover, we can intellectually appreciate that the desire for happiness is better realized by cultivating this uneasiness

This understanding ought to motivate us to do so, at least in our frequent moments of leisure, when we are not distracted by more pressing causes of uneasiness

So with the passage of time we ought to be able to make ourselves free from the uneasiness of immediate desires by having cultivated uneasiness at the absence of great goods

You can do this *if* you are not made so uneasy by the thought of the effort involved that you prefer to do something else.

This means that the question of who acts to realize remote goods and who acts to satisfy the most pressing uneasiness is still something that is determined.

We have not really provided for freedom of the will.

We don't need to provide for any more robust sense of freedom.

What justifies punishment is not that the agent "chose" to do the wicked deed in some robust sense.

All that matters is that the agent was determined to will it as opposed to performing it as a consequence of causes that operated outside of their will.

What is a product of a person's psychology can be changed by factors intended to alter that psychology (such as punishment); what is not cannot be changed by such factors.

Punishment is justified as a response to misdeeds of the former sort, so all we need to do is establish that the will really was a cause of the action, not that the will was "free."