

Cudworth on Indifference
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Ralph Cudworth (1617–88): *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* [TIS] (1678), *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality* [TEIM] (1731), *A Treatise of Freewill* [TFW] (1838), British Library Additional Manuscripts [MS] 4978–82 (~1660s?)

Summary: Cudworth objects to “the vulgar psychology” and its sharp distinction between the faculties of understanding and will. He steals his objection from Episcopus and “the indifferent freewillers.” But he thinks that Episcopus and the indifferent freewillers run afoul of much the same kind of objection as the vulgar psychology itself: by making the will indifferent, they render it blind (and also thereby undermine the distinction between moral good and evil).

1. The Vulgar Psychology

- [T1] The vulgar psychology holds “that there are several faculties in us which are not only really distinct from one another but also from the soul itself” (MS 4982 I, 5).
- [T2] The vulgarly received psychology runs thus. That in the rational soul there are two faculties, understanding and will, which understanding hath nothing of will in it, and will nothing of understanding in it. And to these two faculties are attributed the actions of intellection and volition; the understanding (say they) understandeth, and the will willeth. (TFW 167)

Cudworth’s argument against the vulgar psychology:

- i. *Dilemma.* Either “the blind will do always[s] necessarily follow a necessary dictate of the understanding antecedent” (TFW 169), or it does not.
- ii. *First horn.* If the will does necessarily follow the understanding, “then must all volitions and actions needs be necessary” (TFW 169). Therefore, we are not free.
- iii. *Second horn.* But if the will does not necessarily follow the understanding, “then will liberty of will be mere irrationality, and madness itself acting or determining all human actions” (TFW 169). Therefore, we are not free.

Objection. The understanding could *influence* the will without *determining* it.

Response. How could a “blind” will be “influenced” by the understanding?

- [T3] According to the vulgar psychology, “that which willeth in every man will perpetually will not only it knows not why, but also it knows not what” (TFW 169).
- [T4] But all this while it is really the man or soul that understands, and the man or soul that wills [...]. And thus may it well be conceived that one and the same reasonable soul in us may both will understandingly, or knowingly of what it wills; and understand or think of this or that object willingly. (TFW 171)

2. Episcopus and Indifference

Cudworth’s argument against the vulgar psychology (and his proposed solution) is likely borrowed Simon Episcopus (1583–1643), *Tractatus de Libero Arbitrio* [TLA] (1650):

[T5] It is said in the schools that the soul of man consists of two faculties or powers, which are really distinct from the soul itself and from each other; that is, the intellect and the will. [...] To the intellect, or intellectual power, is given the sole and entire power of apprehending, composing, and judging; to the will is given the entire and sole power of choosing, whether willing or nilling. [...] Through this distinction the whole choice of man is made to be either completely necessary, or a completely irrational and blind action. For when the intellectual power alone is believed to understand and to judge; while the will is held to understand or to judge nothing at all, but only to will and to choose; it is certainly necessary that the will be said to will, either because it is determined to will by the judgment of the intellect, so that it cannot not will, and thus wills not freely but necessarily; or, if we reject this, then surely the will wills and chooses what it wills and chooses by its own motion, and thus wills and chooses by a kind of irrational impulse: because it does not itself judge why it chooses, or why it chooses this rather than that. For it is blind, and really distinct and different from the understanding, as they say. (TLA 199)

Episcopius's solution is to remind us that it is *the soul* that both understands and wills, which leads him to a libertarian account of human liberty:

[T6] If we determine that the soul of man (or man as a whole) itself understands immediately by a certain peculiar property; [...] and the same soul, ***informed by that judgment and understanding***, wills or nills to move itself by its own force towards the object, [...] that whole difficulty is removed, and the liberty of the rational will remains whole and complete; so that it need not necessarily follow the judgment of reason, nor when it elicits a volition, must it necessarily elicit it by a brute and irrational movement, and thus proceed towards the object: but that it may apply the judgment and follow it, if it wills; or, if it does not will to apply the judgment, by a brute and intemperate motion, which is the height and abuse of liberty, it may be carried where it wills. (TLA 199; my emphasis)

[T7] The choice, even after the judgment has been made, remains free, so that man can either follow or neglect that judgment if he wishes: by the same reason that the king can follow, if he wishes, or neglect the advice or judgment of his senators, which he has sought. (TLA 207)

Plot twist: Cudworth rejects the libertarianism of Episcopius and other “indifferent freewillers”:

[T8] That agent is said to be free which, all the requisites for acting having been posited, can act or not act, or so perform one action that he is still able to do the contrary. (Luis de Molina, *Concordia*, Part I, Question 14, Article, 13, Disputatio 2)

[T9] What can now seem more absurd, than to talk here [of] such a freewill as this, as some do, that it is the most glorious privilege and perfection of human nature, that it can thus act ***blindly***, willfully and irrationally. Yet these are the words of a late famous writer *de libero arbitrio*: [...] “This is the apex of human liberty, that a man can in his actings render himself foolish and brutish if he will, i.e. that he can so choose without judgment as if he were altogether devoid of reason like a fool or brute.” (MS 4980, 19; quoting TLA 207; Cudworth's translations, Latin elided; my emphasis)

What is Cudworth's objection against Episcopius and the indifferent freewillers?

- It's “absurd” (MS 4980, 19; quoted above).
- It is not a perfection “for a man to be indifferent either to save or destroy his own life [...] unless extremity of madness be such” (MS 4979, 39).
- But Cudworth also has more interesting (better?) objections...

3. Cudworth's First Objection: the idea of an indifferent power is incoherent or contradictory

- [T10] The idea of a power infinitely contingent or indifferent to all actions and dispositions [...] is an impossible and contradictory idea. Power thus infinitely contingent would be an infinitely weak power or strength, that is, none at all, an infinite nothing. [...] A power and absolute or infinite contingency are contradictions, for every active power is able to do something and consequently has some firmitude and strength in it. (MS 4979, 210)
- [T11] It can hardly be conceived to be any natural power to be indued with a great impetus and agitation or inclination to action without any bias to direct, any scope or mark to aim at, a principle of activity without any particular inclination to any thing. (MS 4980, 13)

Cudworth's first objection:

- i. All powers are oriented towards some object.
 - ii. If the will were indifferent, then it would not be oriented towards any object.
 - iii. Therefore, the idea of an indifferent power is incoherent or contradictory.
- Why (i)? Scholastic background: powers are individuated by their objects.
 - Why (ii)? If the will were oriented towards the good, then it would necessarily follow the judgment of the understanding about what is best.

A Suárezian response. Suárez uses much the same reasoning to argue that we cannot choose evil as such. But he goes on to argue that, in order for an agent to choose some object, it is sufficient that they judge it to be good *in some respect*. This is compatible with indifference because all worldly goods are good in some respects and bad in other respects.

Cudworth's counter-response. Lesser goods are relative evils:

- [T12] Upon this hypothesis [of indifference] a man might will evil as such, for [...] whensoever he chooseth that which the last practical judgment concludes to be less eligible, he chooseth evil as such, a lesser good comparatively to a greater being evil, and yet this is allowed by those authors that the blind faculty of will may act contrary to all judgment of good. (MS 4980, 17–18)

4. Cudworth's Second Objection: indifference undermines the distinction between moral good and evil

Cudworth's teleological theory of good and evil: Good (evil) consists in the agreement (disagreement) or "congruity" ("discongruity") of something to a being's nature (MS 4980, 135).

Cudworth uses the teleological theory of good and evil to argue against indifference:

- [T13] For if the highest perfection of all rational beings be such an indifferent liberty of contradiction and contrariety after all things put as was before described, then

whatsoever they do in the use of this liberty, they can never sin, because they can never act contrary to their nature or the true perfection of their own being. [...] Whatsoever keeps its own nature never sins nor errs, and if active indifferency after all things put without us or within us be the true nature of all rational beings, whatsoever freewilled beings do, they can never swerve or deviate from their natures, the exercise of infinite indifferent liberty being their highest perfection. (4980, 14)

Cudworth's second objection:

- i. Suppose *the teleological theory of good and evil*: Good (evil) consists in the agreement (disagreement) or "congruity" ("discongruity") of something to a being's nature.
- ii. Suppose *indifference*: The will is indifferent in the sense that, presented with some object for choice, the nature of the will is such as to be able equally to choose either for or against that object.
- iii. By *indifference*, it is impossible to choose in a way that is contrary to nature.
- iv. Therefore, by *the teleological theory of good and evil*, it is impossible to choose wrongly.

Objection. Even if the will were indifferent, pain (e.g.) would still be contrary to my nature.

Response. If the will were indifferent, I could still choose things that agree or disagree in various ways with my nature, but I could not be guilty of *moral evil* (sin), which is the kind of evil that pertains specifically to the will. I could choose something that is bad for me, but my doing so could never be morally evil.

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To sum up: The indifferent freewillers replace one kind of blindness with another.

[T14] This faculty or power of the soul seems not to be well defined by active indifferency, especially such an equal indifferency after all things put, all motives and reasons of good. For this is to make it such a natural power or faculty as whereby a being is loose from the good of its own nature and is by contingency or indifferency itself, without any respect thereunto, *blindly* or irrationally determined to whatsoever it does. (4980, 75; my emphasis)

Whereas the original difficulty was to explain how the understanding's judgments of goodness are able to influence a "blind" will, the view of Episcopius and the indifferent freewillers leaves it unclear how *my own* judgments of goodness influence what I myself will: if I am not oriented towards the good in willing, then it's not clear why my own judgments about what is good should have any influence on what I will.