

***ASA  
MAHAN***

A person is seen from behind, standing in a field of tall, golden grass. They are looking out over a vast, flat landscape towards a horizon where the sun is setting, creating a warm, golden glow. The sky is filled with soft, golden light, and there are some distant hills or mountains visible on the horizon.

***DOCTRINE  
OF THE WILL***

**Asa Mahan**

# **Doctrine of the Will**

EAN 8596547218050

DigiCat, 2022

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# CHAPTER I.

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INTRODUCTORY OBSERVATIONS.

## IMPORTANCE OF THE SUBJECT.

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The doctrine of the Will is a cardinal doctrine of theology, as well as of mental philosophy. This doctrine, to say the least, is one of the great central points, from which the various different and conflicting systems of theological, mental, and moral science, take their departure. To determine a man's sentiments in respect to the Will, is to determine his position, in most important respects, as a theologian, and mental and moral philosopher. If we turn our thoughts inward, for the purpose of knowing what we are, what we ought to do, and to be, and what we shall become, as the result of being and doing what we ought or ought not, this doctrine presents itself at once, as one of the great pivots on which the resolution of all these questions turns.

If, on the other hand, we turn our thoughts from ourselves, to a study of the character of God, and of the nature and character of the government which He exercises over rational beings, all our apprehensions here, all our notions in respect to the nature and desert of sin and holiness, will, in many fundamental particulars, be determined by our notions in respect to the Will. In other words, our apprehensions of the nature and character of the Divine government, must be determined, in most important

respects, by our conceptions of the nature and powers of the subjects of that government. I have no wish to conceal from the reader the true bearing of our present inquiries. I wish him distinctly to understand, that in fixing his notions in respect to the doctrine of the Will, he is determining a point of observation from which, and a medium through which, he shall contemplate his own character and deserts as a moral agent, and the nature and character of that Divine government, under which he must ever “live, and move, and have his being.”

## **TRUE AND FALSE METHODS OF INQUIRY.**

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Such being the bearing of our present inquiries, an important question arises, to wit: What should be the influence of such considerations upon our investigations in this department of mental science It should not surely induce us, as appears to be true in the case of many divines and philosophers even, first to form our system of theology, and then, in the light of that, to determine our theory of the Will. The true science of the Will, as well as that of all ether departments of mental philosophy, “does not come by observation,” but by internal reflection. Because our doctrine of the Will, whether true or false, will have a controlling influence in determining the character of our theology, and the meaning which we shall attach to large portions of the Bible, that doctrine does not, for that reason, lose its exclusively psychological character. Every legitimate question pertaining to it, still remains purely and exclusively

a psychological question. The mind has but one eye by which it can see itself, and that is the eye of consciousness. This, then, is the organ of vision to be exclusively employed in all our inquiries in every department of mental science, and in none more exclusively than in that of the Will. We know very well, for example, that the science of optics has a fundamental bearing upon that of Astronomy. What if a philosopher, for that reason, should form his theory of optics by looking at the stars? This would be perfectly analogous to the conduct of a divine or philosopher who should determine his theory of the Will, not by psychological reflection, but by a system of theology formed without such reflection. Suppose again, that the science of Geometry had the same influence in theology, that that of the Will now has. This fact would not change at all the nature of that science, nor the mode proper in conducting our investigations in respect to it. It would still remain a science of demonstration, with all its principles and rules of investigation unchanged. So with the doctrine of the Will. Whatever its bearings upon other sciences may be, it still remains no less exclusively a psychological science. It has its own principles and laws of investigation, principles and laws as independent of systems of theology, as the principles and laws of the science of optics are of those of Astronomy. In pursuing our investigations in all other departments of mental science, we, for the time being, cease to be theologians. We become mental philosophers. Why should the study of the Will be an exception?

The question now returns—what should be the bearing of the fact, that our theory of the Will, whether right or wrong,

will have an important influence in determining our system of theology? This surely should be its influence. It should induce in us great care and caution in our investigations in this department of mental science. We are laying the foundation of the most important edifice of which it ever entered into the heart of man to conceive—an edifice, all the parts, dimensions, and proportions of which, we are required most sedulously to conform to the “pattern shown us in the mount.” Under such circumstances, who should not be admonished, that he should “dig deep, and lay his foundation upon a rock?” I will therefore, in view of what has been said above, earnestly bespeak four things of the reader of the following treatise.

1. That he read it as an honest, earnest inquirer after truth.

2. That he give that degree of attention to the work, that is requisite to an *understanding* of it.

3. That when he dissents from any of its fundamental principles, he will distinctly state to his own mind the reason and ground of that dissent, and carefully investigate its validity. If these principles are wrong, such an investigation will render the truth more conspicuous to the mind, confirm the mind in the truth, and furnish it with means to overturn the opposite error.

4. That he pursue his investigations with *implicit confidence in the distinct affirmations of his own consciousness in respect to this subject*. Such a suggestion would appear truly singular, if made in respect to any other department of mental science but that of the Will. Here it is imperiously called for so long have philosophers and divines

been accustomed to look without, to determine the characteristics of phenomena which appear exclusively within, and which are revealed to the eye of consciousness only. Having been so long under the influence of this pernicious habit, it will require somewhat of an effort for the mind to turn its organ of self-vision in upon itself, for the purpose of correctly reporting to itself, what is really passing in that inner sanctuary. Especially will it require an effort to do this, with a fixed determination to abandon all theories formed from external observation, and to follow implicitly the results of observations made internally. This method we must adopt, however, or there is at once an end of all real science, not only in respect to the Will, but to all other departments of the mind. Suppose an individual to commence a treatise on *colors*, for example, with a denial of the validity of all affirmations of the Intelligence through the eye, in respect to the phenomena about which he is to treat. What would be thought of such a treatise? The moment we deny the validity of the affirmations of any of our faculties, in respect to the appropriate objects of those faculties, all reasoning about those objects becomes the height of absurdity. So in respect to the mind. If we doubt or deny the validity of the affirmations of consciousness in respect to the nature and characteristics of all mental operations, mental philosophy becomes impossible, and all reasoning in respect to the mind perfectly absurd. Implicit confidence in the distinct affirmations of consciousness, is a fundamental law of all correct philosophizing in every department of mental science. Permit me most earnestly to bespeak this

confidence, as we pursue our investigations in respect to the Will.

## **COMMON FAULT.**

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It may be important here to notice a common fault in the method frequently adopted by philosophers in their investigations in this department of mental science. In the most celebrated treatise that has ever appeared upon this subject, the writer does not recollect to have met with a single appeal to *consciousness*, the only adequate witness in the case. The whole treatise, almost, consists of a series of syllogisms, linked together with apparent perfectness, syllogisms pertaining to an abstract something called Will. Throughout the whole, the facts of consciousness are never appealed to. In fact, in instances not a few, among writers of the same school, the right to make such an appeal, on the ground of the total inadequacy of consciousness to give testimony in the case, has been formally denied. Would it be at all strange, if it should turn out that all the fundamental results of investigations conducted after such a method, should be wholly inapplicable to *the Will*, the phenomena of which lie under the eye of consciousness, or to stand in plain contradiction to the phenomena thus affirmed? What, from the method adopted, we see is very likely to take place, we find, from experience, to be actually true of the treatise above referred to. This is noticed by the distinguished author of *The Natural History of Enthusiasm*, in an Essay introductory to Edwards on the Will. "Even the reader," he says, "who is scarcely at all familiar with

abstruse science, will, if he follow our author attentively, be perpetually conscious of a vague dissatisfaction, or latent suspicion, that some fallacy has passed into the train of propositions, although the linking of syllogisms seems perfect. This suspicion will increase in strength as he proceeds, and will at length condense itself into the form of a protest against certain conclusions, notwithstanding their apparently necessary connection with the premises." What should we expect from a treatise on mental science, from which the affirmations of consciousness should be formally excluded, as grounds of any important conclusions? Just what we find to be true, in fact, of the above named treatise on the Will; to wit: all its fundamental conclusions positively contradicted by such affirmations. What if the decisions of our courts of justice were based upon data from which the testimony of all material witnesses has been formally excluded? Who would look to such decisions as the exponents of truth and justice? Yet all the elements in those decisions may be the necessary logical consequents of the data actually assumed. Such decisions may be all wrong, however, from the fact that the data which ought to be assumed in the case, were excluded. The same will, almost of necessity, be true of all treatises, in every department of mental science, which are not based upon the facts of consciousness.

**PROPER METHOD OF REASONING  
FROM REVELATION TO THE SYSTEM  
OF MENTAL PHILOSOPHY THEREIN  
PRE-SUPPOSED.**

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By what has been said, the reader will not understand me as denying the propriety of comparing our conclusions in mental science with the Bible. Though no system of mental philosophy is directly revealed in the Bible, some one system is therein pre-supposed, and assuming, as we do, that the Scriptures are a revelation from God, we must suppose that the system of mental science assumed in the sacred writings, is the true system. If we could find the system pre-supposed in the Bible, we should have an infallible standard by which to test the validity of any conclusions to which we have arrived, as the results of psychological investigation. It is therefore a very legitimate, interesting, and profitable inquiry—what is the system of mental science assumed as true in the Bible? We may very properly turn our attention to the solution of such a question. In doing this, however, two things should be kept distinctly in mind.

1. In such inquiries, we leave the domain of mental philosophy entirely, and enter that of theology. In the latter we are to be guided by principles entirely distinct from those demanded in the former.

2. In reasoning from the Bible to the system of mental philosophy pre-supposed in the Scriptures, we are in danger of assuming wrong data as the basis of our conclusions that is, we are in danger of drawing our inferences from those truths of Scripture which have no legitimate bearing upon the subject, and of overlooking those which do have such a bearing. While there are truths of inspiration from which we may properly reason to the theory of the Will, pre-supposed



in the Bible, there are other truths from which we cannot legitimately thus reason. Now suppose that we have drawn our conclusions from truths of inspiration which have no legitimate bearing upon the subject, truths which, if we do reason from them in the case, will lead us to wrong conclusions; suppose that in the light of such conclusions we have explained the facts of consciousness, assuming that such must be their true character, else we deny the Bible. Shall we not then have almost inextricably lost ourselves in the labyrinth of error?

The following principles may be laid down as universally binding, if we would reason correctly, as philosophers and theologians, on the subject under consideration.

1. In the domain of philosophy, we must confine ourselves strictly and exclusively to the laws of psychological investigation, without reference to any system of theology.

2. In the domain of theology, when we would reason from the truths of inspiration to the theory of the Will presupposed in the Bible, we should be exceedingly careful to reason from those truths only which have a direct and decisive bearing upon the subject, and not from those which have no such bearing.

3. We should carefully compare the conclusions to which we have arrived in each of these domains, assuming that if they do not harmonize, we have erred either as philosophers or theologians.

4. In case of disagreement, we should renew our independent investigations in each domain, for the purpose of detecting the error into which we have fallen.

In conducting an investigation upon such principles, we shall, with almost absolute certainty, find ourselves in each domain, following rays of light, which will converge together in the true theory of the Will.

## **ERRORS OF METHOD.**

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Two errors into which philosophers and divines of a certain class have fallen in their method of treating the department of our subject now under consideration, here demand a passing notice.

1. The two methods above referred to, the psychological and theological, which should at all times be kept entirely distinct and separate, have unhappily been mingled together. Thus the subject has failed to receive a proper investigation in the domain, either of theology or of philosophy.

2. In reasoning from the Scriptures to the theory of the Will pre-supposed in the same, *the wrong truth* has been adduced as the basis of such reasoning, to wit: *the fact of the Divine foreknowledge*. As all events yet future are foreknown to God, they are in themselves, it is said, alike certain. This certainty necessitates the adoption of a particular theory of the Will. Now before we can draw any such conclusion from the truth before us, the following things pertaining to it we need to know with absolute certainty, things which God has not revealed, and which we never can know, until He has revealed them, to wit: the *mode*, the *nature*, and the *degree* of the Divine foreknowledge. Suppose that God should impart to us

apprehensions perfectly full and distinct, of the mode, nature and degree of His foreknowledge of human conduct. How do we know but that we should then see with the most perfect clearness, that this foreknowledge is just as consistent with the theory of the Will, denied by the philosophers and divines under consideration, as with that which they suppose necessarily to result from the Divine foreknowledge? This, then, is not the truth from which we should reason to the theory of the Will pre-supposed in the Bible.

There are truths of inspiration, however, which appear to me to have a direct and decisive bearing upon this subject, and upon which we may therefore safely base our conclusions. In the Scriptures, man is addressed as a moral agent, the subject of commands and prohibitions, of obligation, of merit and demerit, and consequently of reward and punishment. Now when we have determined the powers which an agent must possess, to render him a proper subject of command and prohibition, of obligation, of merit and demerit, and consequently of reward and punishment, we have determined the philosophy of the Will, really pre-supposed in the Scriptures. Beneath these truths, therefore, and not beneath that of the divine foreknowledge, that philosophy is to be sought for. This I argue—

1. Because the former has a *direct*, while the latter has only an *indirect* bearing upon the subject.

2. Of the former our ideas are perfectly clear and distinct, while of the mode, the degree, and the nature of the Divine foreknowledge we are profoundly ignorant. To all eternity, our ideas of the nature of commands and prohibitions, of

obligations, of merit and demerit, and of reward and punishment grounded on moral desert, can never be more clear and distinct than they now are. From such truths, then, and not from those that we do not understand, and which at the utmost have only an indirect bearing upon the subject, we ought to reason, if we reason at all, to the philosophy of the Will pre-supposed in the Scriptures. The reader is now put in possession of the *method* that will be pursued in the following treatise, and is consequently prepared to enter upon the investigation of the subject before us.