# **A TREATISE ON LIBERTY**

IN FOUR PARTS.

## FIRST PART

Human liberty & God’s Foreknowledge are always presumed in free human action, & the difficulty is only in harmonizing the two; however, neither has been proven, & it may even be that some are embarrassed by such a question, whose elements are not true. I will look at the bigger picture, & examine, first, whether God can foresee the actions from free causes, & second, whether men are indeed free.

On the first question, I say that I call foreknowledge (*prescience*) all knowledge (*connoissance*) of the future.

The nature of God’s foreknowledge is unknown to me, but I am familiar with human foreknowledge, by which I can judge God’s, since it is common to God & all men.

Astronomers infallibly predicted the Eclipses; God also predicted them.

God's foreknowledge and that of the Astronomers concerning Eclipses coincide in the fact that both God & the Astronomers know a necessary & invariable order in the movement of celestial bodies, & that they consequently predict the Eclipses which are part of that order.

These kinds of foreknowledge differ, firstly, in that, in celestial movements, God understands the order which He Himself established, & that the Astronomers are not the Authors of the order which they understand.

Secondly, in that God’s foreknowledge is entirely precise, & that that of the Astronomers is not, because the lines of celestial motion are not as regular as they think, & their observations cannot be fully precise.

No other agreements or differences will be found there.

In order for the Astronomers’ foreknowledge about Eclipses to be equal to God’s, all it would take is to remove these differences.

The first makes no difference, it doesn’t matter who established an order to be able to predict its workings; it’s sufficient to understand this order as perfectly as if one had made it oneself, & although a person can’t be its Author without knowing it, they can know it without being its Author.

Indeed, if foreknowledge were only found where power is found, Astronomers would have no foreknowledge about celestial movements, since they have no power over them. Therefore, God doesn’t have foreknowledge in His quality as the Author of all things, but He has it in His quality as a being who knows the order which is in all things.

It only remains, then, to remove the second difference between the foreknowledge of God & that of the Astronomers. For this, all it takes is to think of the Astronomers as perfectly informed about the irregularities of celestial movements & as having made entirely precise observations. There is nothing absurd here.

On this condition, then, it could be claimed, without any temerity, that the foreknowledge of Astronomers about Eclipses would be precisely equal to that of God, as far as foreknowledge is concerned: therefore, the foreknowledge of God about Eclipses would not extend to things to which that of the Astronomers could not reach.

And yet, it’s certain that, as capable as the Astronomers were, they could not foresee the Eclipses, if the Sun or Moon couldn’t sometimes stray from their paths independently of any given cause & rule.

Therefore, God could no more foresee the Eclipses & this lack of foreknowledge in God would have the same reason as the lack of foreknowledge of the Astronomers.

But the Astronomers’ lack of foreknowledge wouldn’t be due to the fact that they aren’t the Authors of the celestial movements, since that has nothing to do with foreknowledge, nor with the fact that they don’t know the movements well enough, since we’re supposing that they know them as well as is possible; but their lack of foreknowledge would be due only to the fact that the established order in the celestial movements wouldn’t be necessary & invariable: therefore, the same cause lead to God’s lack of foreknowledge.

Therefore God, although infinitely powerful & infinitely intelligent, can never foresee that which doesn’t depend on a necessary & invariable order.

Therefore, God doesn’t foresee the actions which result from what are called free causes.

Therefore, there are no free causes, or God doesn’t foresee such actions.

Indeed, it’s easy to conceive that God infallibly foresees everything relating to the physical order of the universe, because this order is necessary & subject to the invariable rules which He has established. This is the principle of His foreknowledge.

But on what principle might He foresee the actions of a cause which nothing could necessarily determine? The second principle of foreknowledge, which must be different from the first, is absolutely inconceivable; & since we have one which is easy to conceive, it is more natural & consistent with the idea of the simplicity of God to believe that this principle is the only one on which all His foreknowledge is based.

It is not part of God’s greatness to foresee things which He Himself would have made unpredictable.

## SECOND PART

We should not, therefore, take liberty away from men in order to preserve a universal foreknowledge for God, but first we need to know if man is indeed free.

Let us examine this second question in itself & on these essential principles, without even considering the prejudice of our opinion concerning our own liberty, & without worrying about its consequences, here is my way of thinking.

That which is dependent on something has certain proportions with this thing, that is, it changes when that thing changes according to the nature of their proportions.

That which is independent of something has no proportions with it, such that it remains the same when that thing increases or diminishes.

I suppose, along with all Metaphysicians, 1. that the soul thinks according to the way the brain is arranged, & that particular thoughts of the soul correspond to certain material arrangements of the brain, & to certain movements which happen there; 2. that all the objects, even the spiritual ones, about which one thinks, leave material dispositions, that is, traces in the brain; 3. I also suppose a brain where there are at the same time two kinds of material dispositions, which are opposites & equally strong; the first of which make the soul think virtuously about a certain subject, the second of which make it think viciously.

This hypothesis can’t be refused, the opposing material dispositions are easy to find together in the brain to the same degree, & they even necessarily meet whenever the soul deliberates & doesn’t know how to decide.

That being assumed, I say: either the soul, in this equilibrium, can absolutely determine the dispositions of the brain to choose between the virtuous & vicious thoughts, or it cannot absolutely determine itself in this equilibrium.

If it can determine itself, it has within itself the power of self-determination, since in its brain all tends only to indecision, & yet it determines itself.

Therefore, this power which it has of self-determination is independent of the dispositions of the brain.

Therefore, it has no proportionality with them.

Therefore, it remains the same although they change.

Therefore, if the brain’s equilibrium holds, the soul determines itself to think virtuously, it would no less have the power of self-determination if the material disposition to think viciously prevailed.

Therefore, no matter how high this material disposition to vicious thoughts might rise, the soul would have no less power to determine itself to the choice of virtuous thoughts.

Therefore, the soul has within itself the power of self-determination despite all the opposite mental dispositions.

Therefore, the thoughts of the soul are always free.

Let us proceed to the second case.

If the soul cannot determine itself absolutely, this comes only from the supposed equilibrium in the brain, & the view is that it will never be determined unless one of the dispositions defeats the other, & that it is necessarily determined in favor of the triumphant one.

Therefore, its power of determining itself to the choice of virtuous or vicious thoughts is absolutely dependent on the dispositions of the brain.

Therefore, to rephrase, the soul does not have any power of self-determination in itself, & it’s the dispositions of the brain which determine it to choose vice or virtue.

Therefore, the thoughts of the soul are never free.

But, by comparing the two cases, either the thoughts of the soul are always free, or they are never free in any case whatsoever.

But, it is true & universally recognized that the thoughts of children, of those who are dreaming, of those who suffer from fevers, & madmen, are never free.

The crux of this argument is easy to see. It sets up a principle, which is uniform in the soul, such that the principle is always, either independent of the dispositions of the brain, or always dependent on them, instead of, as is commonly thought, that it’s dependent sometimes, & independent at other times.

It’s said that the thoughts of those with fevers & madmen are not free, because the material dispositions of the brain are so attenuated & elevated that the soul can’t resist them, whereas in the healthy, the dispositions of the brain are moderated & don’t necessarily overpower the soul.

But, in this system, first of all, since the principle is not uniform, it must be abandoned if I can explain everything by one which is.

Secondly, if a weight of five pounds could fail to be overcome by a weight of six pounds, you’ll understand that not even a weight of a thousand pounds will make any difference; for if it resisted the six pounds because of some principle independent of weight, this principle, whatever it was, would have no more proportion with a weight of a thousand pounds than with one of six, because it would be of a completely different nature from that of weight.

Thus, if the soul resists a material disposition of the brain which leads it to choose vice, & which, although moderated, is still stronger than the material disposition to virtue, then the soul must resist the same material disposition to vice when it is infinitely above the other, because it can only have resisted it at first by means of a principle independent of the dispositions of the brain & which shouldn’t change because of the dispositions of the brain.

In third place, if the soul could see clearly in spite of a disposition of the eye which weakened the sight, one might conclude that it would still be able to see in spite of a disposition of the eye which completely blocked its vision, as far as this is a material phenomenon.

4th. It’s agreed that the soul depends absolutely on the dispositions of the brain as to the quantity of intelligence; however, if on virtue or vice the dispositions of the brain only determine the soul in extreme degrees, & they leave it free when moderated, such that one can have plenty of virtue despite a mediocre disposition to vice, it must be the case that one can have plenty of intelligence despite a mediocre disposition to stupidity, which cannot be allowed; it is true that work can improve the mind, or rather, it strengthens the dispositions of the mind, & thus the intelligence grows precisely as the brain is perfected.

In fifth place, I assume that the only difference between a brain which is awake & one that is sleeping, is that a sleeping brain is less full of spirits, & that the nerves are less tensed, such that the movements are not communicated from one nerve to another, & that the spirits which reopen a trace, don’t reopen another which is connected to it.

That being assumed, if the soul has the power to resist the dispositions of the brain when they are weak, it is always free during dreams, where the dispositions of the brain, which lead it to certain things, are always quite weak. If it’s replied that this is because the only kind of thoughts presented to it offer no matter for deliberation, I would offer the example of a dream where someone deliberates whether or not to kill a friend, which can only be produced by certain opposing material dispositions of the brain; & in this case it seems that, according to the principles of common opinion, the soul should be free.

Now suppose that the person awakens, having decided to kill their friend, & that once awake, they no longer want to kill them: the only change which occurs in the brain is that it has been flooded with spirits, the nerves have tensed; we must see how this can produce liberty.

The material disposition of the brain which, in my dream, made me want to kill my friend, was stronger than the opposite disposition. I say, either the change which occurred in my brain strengthened both of them equally, or they remain in the same disposition that they had had previously, the first remaining, for example, three times stronger than the other; in that case, you couldn’t conceive why the soul is free when one of these dispositions has ten degrees of force & the other thirty, & why it isn’t free when one of these dispositions has only one degree of force & the other only three.

If this change in the brain has strengthened only one of these dispositions, in order to prove liberty, it must be the one against which I determine myself, that is, the one which led me to want to kill my friend, & then you won’t be able to conceive why the force which overcomes this vicious disposition is necessary to enable me to determine myself in favor of the virtuous disposition which remains the same; this change looks more like an obstacle to liberty: finally, if it strengthens one disposition more than another, it must be the vicious disposition again, & you’ll be in no better position to conceive why the force which overcomes it is necessary in order for one to embrace the other which is still the weaker party, although stronger than before.

It may also be said that what prevents the liberty of the soul during sleep is the fact the thoughts aren’t presented to it with sufficient clearness & distinction. I would respond that the lack of clearness & distinction in thoughts can only keep the soul from determining itself with great knowledge, but that it can’t keep it from determining itself freely, & that it shouldn’t take its liberty away, but only the credit or discredit for the decision made.

Any obscurity & confusion in the thoughts means that the soul doesn’t know much about what it deliberates on, but it doesn’t mean the soul isn’t necessarily led to a decision: otherwise, if the soul were necessarily led along, it would surely be led by those of its thoughts which were least obscure & confused, & I would ask why greater clarity & distinction in thoughts would necessarily determine it while asleep but not while awake, & I would point to all my arguments about the material dispositions.

It seems then that the common principle, according to which the will is thought to be uncertain, both dependent & independent of the brain’s dispositions, brings with it insurmountable difficulties, & that it would be better to establish the principle by which the soul determines itself to be always dependent on the dispositions of the brain in every case.

That is more consistent with physics, according to which it seems that the state of wakefulness, or that of sleep, a passion or a hot fever, childhood & advanced age, really only differ in quantitative terms, & that they shouldn’t, consequently, constitute an essential difference, such as granting the soul its liberty, or otherwise.

## THIRD PART

The most considerable difficulties raised by this opinion are the power one has over one’s thoughts, & on the voluntary movements of the body.

It’s commonly agreed that the first thoughts are always presented involuntarily by external objects, or, what amounts to the same thing, by the internal dispositions of the brain: that is quite true. But if the soul formed a first thought independently of the brain, it would also form the second one, & then all the rest, & that, no matter what condition the brain might be in. But it’s commonly said that, after this first one was necessarily presented to the soul, the soul has the power to suppress or to strengthen it, to make it cease or persist.

This power is not yet entirely independent of the brain; since, for example, the soul might therefore in a dream dispose at will of the thoughts which the brain’s dispositions would have presented to it.

But the common opinion is that in states of wakefulness or health, the soul has in its brain spirits on which it can impress, at will, movements meant to suppress or fortify the thoughts which arise, originally, independently of it.

On that, I note that the action of the spirits depends on three things: on the nature of the brain on which they act, on their particular nature, & on the quantity or determination of their movement.

Of these three things it’s only, strictly speaking, the third one which the soul can master. Therefore, the mere power to move spirits is sufficient for liberty.

Yet, I say, first of all, that, if this power of moving spirits is sufficient to make the soul free as to virtue or vice, though it be master neither of the nature of the brain, nor of that of the spirits, why would it be insufficient to make the soul free with respect to the varying degrees of knowledge & natural understanding? If the nature of my brain & of my spirits disposed me to stupidity, wouldn’t the simple power of guiding the movement of my spirits enable me to have, at will, as much discernment & penetration as I could want?

Secondly, if the power of guiding the movement of the spirits were insufficient for liberty, since the soul must have this power in children, & yet it is unfree, that which keeps it from freedom can only be the nature of its brain, & possibly also that of its spirits.

3. Why isn’t the soul of the insane man free, since it can also direct the movement of its spirits? This power is independent of the dispositions of the brains of the insane. If it’s replied that the natural movement of their spirits is then too violent, it follows that, in this state, the forces of the soul have no proportionality with that of the spirits, which necessarily overcome it; and that in a more moderate state where the soul begins to have some proportionality with that of the spirits, the soul cannot completely change the movement of the spirits, but only give them a composite of what they began with & of what it freshly imprints on them, which is a diminution of the soul’s liberty, & that ultimately the soul is only completely free when it imprints a movement on the spirits which of themselves had none, which seems never to happen.

Fourthly, the soul should never find it easier to guide the movement of the spirits than during sleep, & consequently it should never be freer.

If it’s said that the thoughts, the first as well as the second, depend absolutely on the dispositions of the mind, but that they are only the matter of the deliberations, & that the choice the soul makes about it is absolutely free, I ask what causes this difference in nature between the thoughts and the choice one makes, & why madmen & dreamers don’t make choices that are free & independent of the thoughts to which their brain determines them.

On the body’s voluntary movements, the common view is that one moves one’s foot or arm freely, & it is true that these movements are voluntary, but it doesn’t absolutely follow from this that they are free. That which one does because one wishes to, is voluntary, but it is not free, unless one can really or effectively keep oneself from wishing to do it.

When I move my hand to write, I write because I want to, & if I didn’t want to, I wouldn’t write; that is voluntary & involves no compulsion. But there is in my brain a material disposition which makes me want to write, to the extent that I can’t truly not wish to do so; that is necessary & has nothing free in it; so, that which is voluntary is at the same time necessary, & that which is without liberty doesn’t involve compulsion.

Conceive, then, that as the brain moves the soul, such that, to its movement corresponds a thought in the soul, the soul moves the brain, such that to its thought corresponds a movement of the brain.

The soul is determined necessarily by its brain to want what it wants, & its will necessarily stimulates in its brain a movement by which it brings it to execution.

Thus, if I had no soul, I would not do what I do, & if I didn’t have such a brain, I wouldn’t want to do it.

All the other movements, like that of the heart, etc., are not caused by the soul. It can only work by means of thought, & whatever is not produced by a thought, doesn’t come from the soul.

On this principle, I can easily explain everything that relates to voluntary movements; but I would also like, while giving this answer, to draw new proofs from it.

I suppose a madman who wants to kill someone, & who actually kills him. The movement of this madman’s arm is voluntary, that is, produced by the soul, because it wants to make it; for if it weren’t, it would be necessary for the same material disposition of the brain which had led the madman’s soul to want to kill, to also make the spirits flow in the nerves so as to move the arm, & that that which had made him want to, had at the same time executed its will, without the soul’s involvement, having impressed no movement on the brain. From which it obviously follows, 1. That if the madman were a pure living machine with no thinking soul, he would also have killed this man, choosing the arms to do so, & even picking out the spots where his victim was most vulnerable

In second place, that should this madman be cured, he might still kill a man while wanting to kill him, but without killing him precisely because he wanted to, since the dispositions of the brain which make him want to kill, might yet stimulate in his arm the movement by which it would kill independently of the soul. That, in this way, any man’s soul wouldn’t be the cause of any movement, but it would only want it when it occurred, & consequently, by removing the soul from the picture, men would still do everything they do, which cannot be admitted.

Therefore, the movement of this madman’s arm is voluntary, but certainly this movement is not free.

Therefore, it is not absolutely in the nature of voluntary movements to be free.

Indeed, it’s the soul of this madman that moves his arm because it wants to kill, but it is necessarily led to want to kill by the dispositions of his brain.

## FOURTH PART

All that remains for me is to discover the source of the universal error about liberty & the cause of our internal feeling.

All prejudices have some basis, & once we find it, we must also discover why one has fallen into error instead of the truth.

The two sources of our error about liberty are that people only do what they want to do, & they often deliberate whether to do it or not.

A slave doesn’t think he’s free, because he feels that he does what he does in spite of himself, & he knows the external cause which makes him do it; but he would think himself free if it were possible to hide his master from him, & make him execute his orders without knowing it, & if these orders were always consistent with his inclinations.

Men are in this very condition, they don’t know that their brain’s dispositions produce all their thoughts & all their diverse volitions; & the orders they receive, so to speak, from their brain are always consistent with their inclinations, since they also cause these inclinations. Thus, the soul thinks it is self-determining, because it is ignorant of & completely unaware of the foreign principle of its determination.

People know that they do what they want to do, but they don’t know why they want to, only Physicists can figure that out.

Secondly, a person has deliberated, & because they have felt torn between wanting & not wanting, they have thought, after coming to a decision, that they could have taken a different one; this conclusion was mistaken, for something else would have had to occur in order to ruin the parity between the two choices, & that would necessarily have led to a choice, but they couldn’t think that, since they didn’t realize that something new had occurred & resolved their irresolution, & in the absence of this feeling, they were led to believe that the soul had decided of itself, independently of any external cause.

What produces this deliberation, & what most people have been unable to see, is the equality of forces between two opposing dispositions of the brain, which brings opposing thoughts to the soul; as long as this equality remains, people deliberate, but as soon as one of the material dispositions defeats the other, due to some physical cause, the corresponding thoughts are strengthened & become a choice. This is why people often decide without having any new thoughts, but only because they think something more strongly than previously. This is also why people can make decisions without knowing why. If the soul were self-determining, it should always know why. In a wakeful state, the brain is full of spirits & the nerves are tensed, such that movements are communicated from one trace to another connected to it. Thus, as you have only ever heard of homicide described as a crime; when someone makes you think of it, the same movement of the spirits will open again the traces which present to you the horror of this deed, & in brief, on any given subject, all the traces connected to it reopen & consequently bring you all the different thoughts which might come from that.

But during sleep, the lack of intelligence & the relaxation of the nerves set the spirits in motion, which reopen, for example, the traces which make you think of a homicide, don’t necessarily reopen those which are linked to this & which represented them to you as a crime; & in general you’re not presented with all that you might be able to think about every subject, this is why people think they are free while awake, & not while sleeping, even though in both states the soul is equally determined by the dispositions of the brain.

Nobody thinks that insane people are free since all the dispositions of their brains are so strong for certain things that they have no disposition at all leading them to contrary things, or that what they do have is infinitely weak, & thus they have no power of deliberation, whereas in those of a sound mind, the brain is in a certain equilibrium which produces deliberation.

But it’s obvious that a weight of five pounds, overcome by a weight of six, is by the same necessity overcome by a weight of a thousand pounds, although less quickly [in the former case]; thus those of a sound mind, determined by a disposition of the brain which is only a little stronger than its opposite disposition, are as necessarily determined as those who are pulled along by a disposition which has not been shaken by any other one; but the impetuosity is far less in some than others, & it seems that impetuosity has been mistaken for necessity, & gentle movements for liberty. By their internal sense, people had a right to judge about impetuosity or gentleness in the movements, but one can only judge about necessity or liberty through reason.

As to morality, this system makes virtue a pure happiness, & vice a pure misery, it therefore destroys the vanity & all the temerity that can come from virtue, & leads to a great deal of pity for the wicked, but without inspiring hatred against them. It in no way removes the hope of correcting them; since by dint of exhortation & example, it’s possible to fill their brains with dispositions which will lead them to virtue, & this is what preserves the laws, punishments, & rewards.

Criminals are monsters who must be suppressed while weeping over them, their sacrifice saves society from them & frightens those who might want to imitate them.

People owe even their good qualities, or the inclination to good, to their temperament alone, & there is no point in revering a certain reason, whose extreme weakness is also well known. Those who have the good fortune of being able to work on themselves can strengthen their natural dispositions to good.

Finally, this system changes nothing in the order of the world, except maybe that it takes from good men a reason for honoring themselves & despising others, & helps them suffer insults without feeling indignation or bitterness against their perpetrators. I nevertheless confess that the idea of being able to refrain from vice is something which often helps us restrain ourselves, & that the truth that we have just discovered is dangerous for those with bad inclinations. But it’s not the only subject on which it would seems that God wanted to hide from the majority truths which might be harmful to them.

In addition, this system is very uniform & its principle is very simple, the same principle decides on the natural mind & morals, & according to the different degrees it receives, it’s what distinguishes madmen from sages, those who sleep from those who are awake, etc.

All is contained within a physical order, in which human actions are, as far as God is concerned, the same thing as Eclipses, & where He foresees both things according to the same principle.

*Haec refutando transcripsi digniori modo sentieus deliberate.*