

# Anthony Collins' Conception of Free-Thinking in the Discourse of Free-Thinking

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*I examine Collins' definition of free-thinking, his further claim that free-thinking is a natural right, and two arguments in favour of free-thinking. I argue that Collins' notion of free-thinking as a natural right also involves a natural, epistemic duty, implicit in the normative content of the definition.*

Keywords: *Free-Thinking, Epistemology, Judgment, Reason, Epistemic justification.*

Collins published his *Discourse of Free-Thinking* in 1713, after *An Essay Concerning the Use of Reason in Propositions* (1707, hereafter *Essay*) and before *A Philosophical Inquiry Concerning Human Liberty* (1717, hereafter *Inquiry*). The three works are thematically inter-related and form, I believe, a broadly coherent whole. Much of the *Discourse* is polemical, but Section I and part of Section II are philosophically important in virtue of their epistemological content. Focusing on these two sections of the *Discourse* I examine Collins' definition of free-thinking (Part 2), his claim that free-thinking is a natural right (Part 3) and two of his arguments in favour of free-thinking (Parts 4 and 5). To conclude (Part 6) I argue that Collins' notion of free-thinking is normative, and that it is closely connected with his theory of epistemic duty. However, I begin (Part 1) by considering some basic epistemological notions that Collins discusses in the *Essay* and the *Inquiry*, as they shed important light on the *Discourse*.

## 1. Basic notions

In the *Essay* Collins describes propositions as follows: "All Propositions whatever consist of Terms or Words which stand for Ideas, concerning which some agreement is affirm'd or deny'd" [...]; "Is or is not are those Terms which signify the agreement or disagreement"<sup>1</sup>. He distinguishes five types of propositions accord-

<sup>1</sup> A. Collins, *An Essay Concerning the Use of Reason in Propositions, The Evidence whereof depends upon Human Testimony*, London, 1709 (second edition corrected), p. 3.