
Augustine's Will

A Power of the Soul

The Will Prior to Augustine

- ❖ There are discussions in Aristotle and Seneca, but scholars legitimately dispute the degree to which these figures were working with a clear conception of the will as a faculty of soul.
 - ❖ Aristotle spoke of *boulêsis* (βούλησις), a rational wish for the good, as well as *prohairesis* (προαιρέσις), literally a ‘choosing before’. The Greek Stoics equally spoke of *prohairesis*, especially in contexts of determining how to lead one’s life.
 - ❖ Seneca, too, as a Latin Stoic, made use of a notion of will (*voluntas*).
- ❖ So, it would be wrong to say, as some do, that Augustine ‘invented’ or ‘discovered’ the will.
- ❖ Still, that allowed, he is the first figure to make use of it widely and systematically, and to speak so broadly of the will’s being *free*, and thus, ultimately, the first to speak distinctly and at length of a recognizable notion of free will (*liberum arbitrium*).

Two Questions: What? and Why?

- ❖ First question: what exactly is the will?
 - ❖ What is it such that it can be *free*?
 - ❖ If it is indeed a faculty of soul, and it was indeed discovered by Augustine, why did the will escape the notice of a millennium of philosophers and literary authors thinking about the soul before him?
- ❖ Second question: however that may be, why does Augustine shine such a light on it?
 - ❖ What motivates his preoccupation with the will?
 - ❖ Is it the case, for instance, that his interest results from his specific form of Catholic theism?

What: a Sketch I

- ❖ Humans and other animals have intentional attitudes towards various objects.
 - ❖ Some of them we judge as good (or good for us) and desire them.
 - ❖ Others we judge as bad (or bad for us) and avoid them or, if they are upon us, flee from them.
- ❖ One might reasonably contend that when we desire or avoid some object, having judged it, or experienced it, as good or bad (or good or bad for us), *before* we desire it or seek to avoid it, another wheel within must turn.
 - ❖ To take a simple case: when we are thirsty, we see cold liquid before us as good; but before we desire it, and certainly before we pursue it, we must assent to its being good and not merely seeming good.
 - ❖ We might, after all, determine that it is vodka in the glass and not water.
 - ❖ To take a more complex case: if we are fighting in a battle, we see danger approaching; before we avoid it, and certainly before we flee, we need to assent to its being bad and as something to be shunned.
 - ❖ We might, after all, decide that courage directs us to stand and fight.
- ❖ In a word: before acting we must offer our *assent*.

What: a Sketch II

- ❖ Notice that this assent might be second-order: it might, that is, take as its object our own inner representation of an external object.
- ❖ When I judge that some drink before me is good (or good for me), and represent it as such, and form a desire to drink, I might yet withhold or grant my assent to that representation.
- ❖ My desire, is first order, in the sense that it takes an external object, like a drink presented me; but my assent is second order, in the sense that it takes as its object my own desire, an internal object.
- ❖ When I assent, I form a *volition*, an action of my will.
- ❖ Note, too, that very often I can represent one and the same object as good and bad in different respects (as good or bad for me, in different respects). In such a case it is natural, almost unavoidable, to speak of my will as choosing one or the other of my representations as worthy of my assent.
 - ❖ The dish of ice cream before me is good (it will be pleasurable to eat) and also bad (I am a diabetic or have high cholesterol, or have been going too much weight. . .).
 - ❖ This offer of sex is good (it will be pleasurable) and also bad (it is an invitation to an STD or a harmful act of adultery).

Up to Us

- ❖ Arguably, in this entire story, the only thing *up to us* is our decision to assent or withhold assent.
- ❖ That something appears pleasurable or dangerous is, in large measure, immediately, not up to us: things simply so appear.
- ❖ In his work dedicated to this topic, *De Libero Arbitrio*, Augustine locates our will as our source of goodness: ‘nothing is as completely in our will as will itself’ (1.25–26; 29).
- ❖ Still, he does not think that our power here is absolute: we are craven, due both to our human condition (original sin) and our own past choices. See, e.g. *Confessions* viii 8.20–10.22 and 11.26.

Why? *Unde Malum?*

- ❖ The problem of evil, Augustine tells us, tormented him from his youth (*Confessions* vii 7.11)
- ❖ He sees its origin as intimately connected to the will (*Confessions* vii 3.5)
- ❖ Notice here again the GG theory: how can one choose something evil? Or, rather, how can someone choose evil *believing* or *knowing* it to be evil?

A Simple Argument

- (1) God willingly and knowingly created the universe in its entirety *ex nihilo*.
- (2) If S willingly and knowingly creates x , then S is responsible for x and all of its contents and features.
- (3) The universe contains evil.
- (4) So, God is responsible for the evil in the universe.

Manichean Period

- ❖ Early on Augustine accepts the Manichean position, which, he came to believe, freed God from the responsibility for evil at the expense of compromising divine omnipotence (*Confessions* v 10.20)

Evil as Privation

- ❖ In fact, all of creation is good: evil is merely a falling away from being (*Confessions* vii 16.22).

A Closing Puzzle

- ❖ What causes a will to be evil? What brings it about that a will prefers evil to goodness?
- ❖ Consider the case of the fall of the angels:
 - ❖ The choice to choose evil cannot be caused by any created substance (roughly, any primary being such as you or me), since every substance is created and so good, and what is good, as good, cannot cause evil.
 - ❖ If we say that the cause is the will itself, that only relocates our question elsewhere: what causes a will to will evil?
- ❖ Augustine considers two intellectually indiscernible agents, one of whom chooses the good and one of whom chooses evil (*De Civitate Dei* 12.6).
 - ❖ This suggests to him that the exercise of the will is just that: a spontaneous exercise of an uncaused, if conditioned faculty.
- ❖ One unhappy consequence: the will willing evil has no efficient cause but only a 'deficient cause', a result which comes rather close to the unwanted conclusion that there simply is no explanation for a will's willing evil.
 - ❖ This, though, is evidently precisely what is needed to account for Augustine's Catholic notion of sin, namely the choosing of love of self over the love of God (*De Civitate Dei* 14.28).