
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* (προαίρεσις), a rational preference, 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 objects 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), we do only only if *before* we desire it or seek to avoid it another wheel within turns.
 - ❖ 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

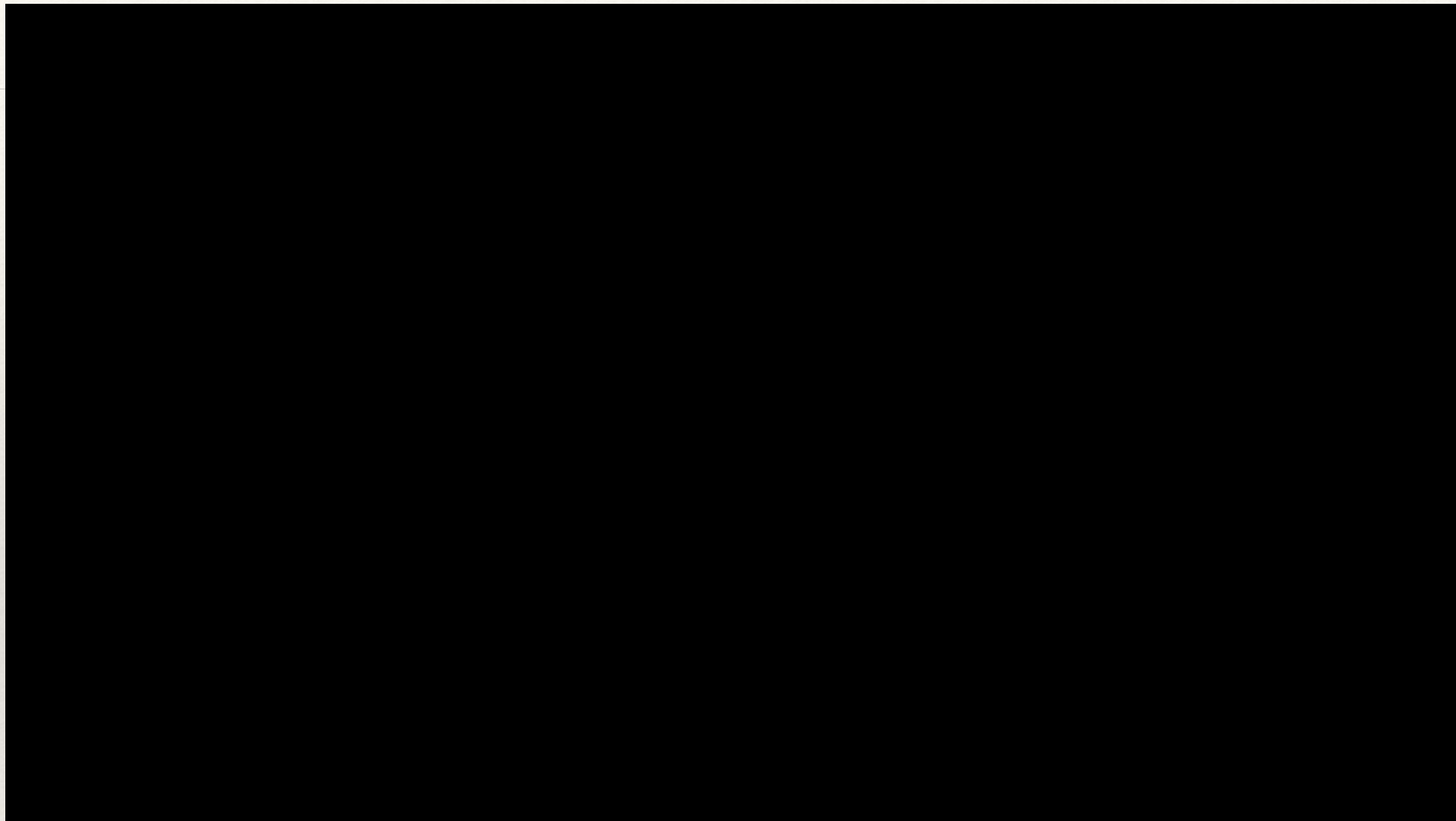
- ❖ Notice that this assent might be second-order: it might, that is, take as its object our own inner representation of an external object.
- ❖ When I judge that some drink before me is good (or good for me), and represent it as such, and form a desire to drink, I might yet withhold or grant my assent 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.

Up to US?

Consider the Domino Universe



An Inconsistent Triad

1. Every event has a cause.
2. If every event has a cause, we are not free.
3. We are free.

Causal Determinism (CD)

- ❖ Let causal determinism be the thesis that every event has a cause.
 - ❖ By *cause* let us understand an *antecedent sufficient condition*.
 - ❖ To illustrate: if domino D^1 falls, then domino D^2 will fall; if D^2 then, D^3 ; if, D^3 , then D^4 ; and so on.
 - ❖ D^1 falling is sufficient for D^2 falling, which in turn is sufficient for D^3 falling. . .
- ❖ One thought: if CD, then our universe is a line of dominoes, each event necessitating the one which follows.

Why suppose CD?

- ❖ Nothing can change or alter unless it's *made* to change or alter.
 - ❖ Nothing, in fact, *simply happens*.
 - ❖ Aristotelian formulation: only something actual can make something potentially ϕ become actually ϕ .
 - ❖ Thus, a grey fence is potentially white. Only something actual—e.g., a painter painting it with white paint—can make it actually white.
- ❖ Further, CD seems to be a presupposition of all scientific and rational inquiry: to understand something is in part just to know what brought it about.
 - ❖ To come to understand, e.g., what illness an afflicted group suffers, one must come to know how it is they came to be ill—to know, that is, what caused their illness.
- ❖ Finally, one might argue: if not CD, then any given event might be uncaused; but that result is intolerable; so, CD must be accepted, at least as a unavoidable hypothesis.

Why suppose if CD, we are not free?

- ❖ If CD, then every event is necessitated; and if every event is necessitated, then it is made to happen.
 - ❖ Yes, one might say, 'tis I myself who makes certain events happen: that is what happens when I freely choose one alternative among others.
 - ❖ Yet, a choosing is itself an event. So, if CD, that event too is made to happen.
 - ❖ If I choose to go left rather than right, then, if CD, something caused me to choose to go left rather than right. So, going left was necessitated.
 - ❖ If it was necessitated, my choice was not free, but determined.
 - ❖ So, it was a choice in name only.
- ❖ If CD, in fact, the chain of causes extends back before the time of my birth.
 - ❖ Obviously, I cannot change things that occurred before I was born.

More Expansively

1. If CD, then every event has a cause.
2. If every event has a cause, then the chain of events in which my actions are implicated is but part of a causal chain extending back to the time before I was born.
3. If so, then I could not have done otherwise than I actually now do.
4. If I cannot do otherwise than I actually now do, then I am not free.
5. So, if CD, I (we) am (are) not free.
 - ❖ In sum, if CD, we are but dominoes falling in a row.

Why suppose we are free?

- ❖ A special theological reason: the free will defense to the problem of evil obviously presupposes free will.
- ❖ A perfectly neutral reason: we experience ourselves as free.
 - ❖ Let us call this the *phenomenology of agency*—this is especially vivid in Augustine.
- ❖ In general, freedom seems a condition on the ascription of responsibility.
 - ❖ All practices of praise and blame seem to presuppose freedom.
 - ❖ This suggests a simple argument:
 1. We are right to praise/blame S with respect to *a* only if S is responsible for *a*.
 2. S is responsible for *a* only if S could have done otherwise with respect to *a*.
 3. S could have done otherwise with respect to *a* only if S is free with respect to *a*.
 4. We are in fact sometimes right to praise/blame S.
 5. So, for at least some actions *a*, S is free with respect to *a*.

Our Problem

- ❖ So, we have a problem: (1), (2), and (3) all seem well-motivated.
- ❖ Yet (evidently) at least one of them must be false.
 - ❖ Our first question: which?

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).
- ❖ Evil is privation of goodness (*privatio boni*): note that a privation is more than merely a negation.
- ❖ See also:
 - ❖ 'For what is that which we call evil but the absence of good? In the bodies of animals, disease and wounds mean nothing but the absence of health; for when a cure is effected, that does not mean that the evils which were present—namely, the diseases and wounds—go away from the body and dwell elsewhere: they altogether cease to exist; for the wound or disease is not a substance (*substantia*), but a defect in the fleshly substance,—the flesh itself being a substance, and therefore something good, of which those evils—that is, privations of the good which we call health—are accidents. Just in the same way, what are called vices in the soul are nothing but privations of natural good. And when they are cured, they are not transferred elsewhere: when they cease to exist in the healthy soul, they cannot exist anywhere else.'—Augustine (*Enchiridion* 11)
 - ❖ 'For evil has no positive nature; but the loss of good has received the name *evil*.'—Augustine (*De Civitate Dei*, Ch. 11)

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).