

Do We Have A Will? Augustine's Way Into The Will

Posted on September 2, 2019

View this essay online:

<https://academic-master.com/do-we-have-a-will-augustines-way-into-the-will/>

Introduction

Augustine's theory of the will develops through a sustained attempt to explain how human beings can be morally responsible in a world created by a perfectly good God. His account is often compared with the Socratic claim that wrongdoing results from ignorance about what is genuinely good. The comparison is useful because both thinkers reject the idea that evil is a positive substance desired for its own sake. Yet Augustine gives moral failure a different psychological structure. Socrates tends to argue that a person who truly knows the good would choose it, while Augustine describes situations in which a person recognizes a higher good and still turns toward a lower one. That difference makes the will central. In *On Free Choice of the Will*, free choice explains responsibility; in the *Confessions*, Augustine dramatizes a will divided by competing loves; and in later theological writings he emphasizes the damage of habit, original sin, and the need for grace. His theory therefore combines philosophical reflection, moral psychology, and Christian theology into a distinctive account of human agency.

From Socratic Ignorance to Augustine's Disordered Choice

Socratic moral intellectualism holds that people desire what they take to be good and that wrongdoing follows from error about what genuinely benefits the soul. Wealth, pleasure, reputation, or power may appear advantageous, but a wise person recognizes that injustice damages the agent even when it produces immediate gain. Augustine preserves part of this structure because he also believes human desire is always directed toward something perceived as good. A thief may seek money, excitement, companionship, or power, all of which contain some limited attraction. The moral problem lies in pursuing a lesser good in a way that violates justice and proper order. Augustine therefore does not imagine a person choosing "pure evil" as an independent object. He differs from Socrates by insisting that knowledge alone may not be sufficient. A person can understand that an action is wrong and still prefer the lower good because desire, habit, pride, or fear has become stronger than intellectual judgment. This move gives the will a more independent role in moral failure.

Evil as Privation and the Goodness of Free Will

Augustine's mature metaphysics rejects the Manichaean idea that good and evil are competing cosmic substances. If God is the source of being and God is good, then everything that exists possesses goodness insofar as it exists. Evil is therefore privation: a corruption, absence, or disorder within something that is otherwise good. Blindness, for example, is not a new substance added to an eye but the loss of a capacity that should be present. Moral evil works similarly. Speech, desire, intelligence, bodily power, and freedom are good capacities, but they can be damaged or misdirected. Free will is an "intermediate good" because without it human beings could not love justice voluntarily or deserve praise, yet the same faculty can be misused. Augustine's theory thus explains how a good creation can contain wrongdoing without making God the author of an evil substance. The problem lies in the order of love: a rational creature turns from a higher, unchanging good toward lower, changeable goods in a way that violates their proper relation.

The Divided Will, Habit, and Moral Weakness

Book VIII of the *Confessions* gives Augustine's most influential description of inner conflict. He believes he should convert and understands the life he wants to choose, yet longstanding habits and desires resist that judgment. He speaks of a divided will, not because two separate persons exist within him, but because one self is pulled by competing loves. This experience directly challenges the idea that clear knowledge automatically produces right action. Repeated choices form habits, and habits can eventually feel like necessity, making future action harder even when responsibility is not completely erased. Augustine's pear-theft story also illustrates the complexity of motivation. He did not need the pears for nourishment; the attraction included companionship, transgression, and the excitement of doing what was forbidden. Such examples make his theory psychologically richer than a simple model in which every wrong act is a calculation for material benefit. They also explain why [human freedom](#) must be understood across time, since earlier choices can shape the character and habits from which later choices emerge.

Original Sin, Grace, and the Meaning of Freedom

Augustine's later theology complicates free will by arguing that fallen humanity inherits a damaged moral condition. The will is not destroyed, but it cannot achieve full righteousness through unaided effort. This position generated controversy because it appears to threaten responsibility: if grace is necessary for genuinely good action, why blame people for failing without it? Augustine answers that fallen incapacity is not external coercion imposed on an innocent agent; it is a disorder belonging to human nature after the fall. Grace therefore does more than supply additional information. It heals desire and enables a person to love the good more fully. For Augustine, freedom is not the neutral capacity to select any option whatsoever. The highest freedom is the ability to delight in and remain

attached to what is genuinely good. A person enslaved by destructive desire may still make choices while lacking the fullest form of moral liberty. This theological account sharply separates Augustine from Socrates, whose remedy centers on philosophical knowledge rather than divine grace and redemption.

Conclusion

Augustine's theory of the will is indebted to Socratic and Platonic philosophy but cannot be reduced to classical intellectualism expressed in Christian language. Socrates explains wrongdoing primarily through ignorance of the true good, whereas Augustine argues that a person may recognize a higher good and still choose a lower one because the will is disordered by desire and habit. His privation theory preserves the goodness of creation by treating evil as corruption rather than substance, while his account of free will explains how moral responsibility can arise from the misuse of a good faculty. The *Confessions* then shows why moral life involves more than knowledge: people can be internally divided and become less free through repeated choices. Later doctrines of original sin and grace make freedom even more complex, because human beings retain agency while requiring divine assistance for complete moral restoration. Augustine's answer to the question "Do we have a will?" is therefore yes, but the will is neither absolutely independent nor naturally self-sufficient. It becomes most free when desire, judgment, and love are rightly ordered toward the good.

References

Augustine. *Confessions*, especially Books II, VII, and VIII.

Augustine. *On Free Choice of the Will*.

Harrison, S. (1999). "Do We Have a Will? Augustine's Way into the Will." In G. B. Matthews (Ed.), *The Augustinian Tradition*. University of California Press.

Matthews, G. B. (2005). *Augustine*. Blackwell.