

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

Posted on September 2, 2019

Introduction

Augustine's account of evil and the will is often compared with the Socratic claim that no one knowingly chooses evil. The original essay correctly detects a relationship between the two traditions, especially their refusal to treat evil as an independently desirable substance. It also recognizes Augustine's theory that evil is a privation or corruption of good. However, it makes the two thinkers too similar. Socrates usually explains wrongdoing through ignorance about what is genuinely good, whereas Augustine argues that a person can recognize a higher good and still turn toward a lower one through a disordered will. Augustine's theory therefore develops in dialogue with classical philosophy but adds a stronger account of culpable choice, habit, divided desire, original sin, and grace.

The Question "Do We Have a Will?"

The title concerns more than whether human beings make decisions. It asks whether the will is a distinct power that can be morally responsible rather than merely the final result of ignorance, appetite, social pressure, or divine causation. Augustine's writings helped give the will a central place in Western philosophy. In *On Free Choice of the Will*, free choice makes moral praise and blame possible. In the *Confessions*, Augustine describes a will divided against itself. In later anti-Pelagian works, he emphasizes that fallen human freedom is wounded and requires divine grace. His position develops over time, but he does not simply abandon responsibility. (Harrison, 1999; Matthews, 2005)

Socrates and the Intellectualist View of Wrongdoing

In Platonic dialogues, Socrates often argues that people desire what they take to be good and that wrongdoing arises from ignorance or mistaken judgment. A person who truly knew what was best for the soul would choose it. This position links virtue with knowledge. It does not mean that right and wrong do not matter or that people consciously pursue selfish benefit regardless of morality, as the original essay suggests. For Socrates, the genuinely beneficial life is the virtuous life. Apparent advantages such as wealth, power, or pleasure can damage a person when pursued without wisdom.

Why Socratic Ignorance Is Morally Serious

Calling wrongdoing ignorance does not make it harmless. A person may be responsible for refusing examination, accepting flattering beliefs, or failing to cultivate judgment. Socratic philosophy seeks to expose contradiction so that the person can recognize false assumptions about happiness and virtue. The remedy for wrongdoing is therefore education of the soul, not merely external punishment. Yet the theory faces a familiar objection: people sometimes appear to know that an action is wrong and do it anyway. Augustine's analysis of divided will addresses precisely this experience.

Augustine's Rejection of Evil as a Substance

Before his conversion to Christianity, Augustine was attracted to Manichaeism, which presented good and evil as opposing cosmic principles. He later rejected the idea that evil is a substance created alongside good. If God is the source of all being and God is good, everything that exists insofar as it exists must possess some goodness. Evil is therefore not a thing with independent being. It is a privation: the absence, disorder, or corruption of a good that ought to be present. Blindness, for example, is not a substance added to an eye but the loss of a proper capacity.

Privation Does Not Mean Evil Is Unreal

The privation theory is sometimes misunderstood as denying suffering or moral horror. Augustine's point is metaphysical, not emotional. Corruption can be devastating even though it depends on a good nature that is being damaged. A lie corrupts the goods of speech and trust; cruelty misuses agency and bodily power; injustice disorders relationships and institutions. Evil lacks independent substance but has real effects through damaged goods and disordered action. The theory attempts to preserve both God's creative goodness and the seriousness of moral evil.

Free Will as an Intermediate Good

In *On Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine argues that free will is itself a good because without it people could not choose rightly, love justice, or deserve praise. It is not the highest good and can therefore be misused. The existence of a faculty capable of sin does not make its creator evil, just as hands are good even though they can be used to harm. Moral evil originates when a rational creature turns voluntarily from an unchangeable higher good toward changeable lower goods in a disordered manner. The problem is not that created goods are evil; it is that the will loves them without proper order. (Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*)

Choosing Lesser Goods

Augustine's analysis is subtler than the claim that no one intends any bad deed. A thief may want money, safety, recognition, or excitement—each connected to some genuine good—but chooses them through injustice. The object sought has goodness, while the way it is loved and pursued is disordered. This allows Augustine to explain how people can desire something attractive while committing evil. They do not choose evil as pure evil; they choose a lesser or partial good at the expense of justice and the higher good.

The Pear Theft in the Confessions

Augustine's account of stealing pears as a youth tests the idea that every wrong act is simply a rational pursuit of benefit. He says he did not need the pears and valued the shared wrongdoing itself. The story highlights social imitation, excitement, shame, and the desire to transgress. Even here, the will does not love a metaphysical substance called evil. It seeks distorted goods such as companionship, power, or the thrill of forbidden action. The episode demonstrates that human motivation can be opaque and that a person may participate in wrongdoing while recognizing its moral character. (Augustine, *Confessions*)

The Divided Will

Book VIII of the *Confessions* gives Augustine's most influential account of inner conflict. He wants to convert and understands the life he believes he should choose, yet he remains attached to old habits. He describes two wills, not as two separate substances, but as one person pulled by competing loves. Knowledge is therefore insufficient. The mind can affirm a higher good while habit and desire resist. This is a major departure from a simple Socratic intellectualism. Augustine treats moral failure as a weakness and fragmentation of agency, not merely a false proposition in the mind.

Habit and the Weakening of Freedom

Repeated choices form habits, and habits can become experienced as necessity. Augustine describes a chain in which distorted desire becomes habit and unresisted habit becomes compulsion. Freedom is not merely the presence of options at one isolated moment. It also depends on the character formed through earlier actions. A person may remain responsible while finding good action increasingly difficult. This account anticipates later discussions of addiction, compulsion, and moral formation, though contemporary psychology adds biological and social explanations Augustine did not possess.

Original Sin and the Fallen Will

Augustine's later theology emphasizes that human beings inherit a damaged condition from Adam. The will is not destroyed but is unable to achieve righteousness by its own unaided power. This creates tension: if people cannot avoid sin without grace, how can they be responsible? Augustine answers that the incapacity is not an external coercion imposed on an innocent will; it is a disordered condition belonging to fallen humanity. Critics, including the Pelagians, argued that this position endangered moral responsibility. The debate shows that Augustine's mature theory cannot be reduced to a simple celebration of unrestricted free choice.

Grace and Liberated Freedom

For Augustine, grace does not merely supply information. It heals desire and enables the person to love the good. True freedom is not neutral ability to select anything whatsoever; it is the capacity to delight in and adhere to the highest good. A person enslaved by destructive desire may technically make choices but lacks full moral liberty. Grace restores the will from within rather than forcing it mechanically from outside. This theological dimension sharply distinguishes Augustine from Socrates, whose remedy centers on philosophical knowledge and care of the soul rather than divine redemption through Christ.

Similarity Between Socrates and Augustine

Both thinkers reject the idea that rational agents seek evil simply because it is evil. Both connect moral failure with a distorted understanding of good and treat the health of the soul as more important than external success. They also believe that wrongdoing harms the wrongdoer, even when it produces immediate advantage. Augustine inherits from Platonism the conviction that goodness is ordered and that the highest good should govern lower desires. These similarities justify speaking of a Socratic or Platonic background to his thought.

Difference Between Ignorance and Perverse Will

The decisive difference is Augustine's willingness to describe a culpable turning of the will even when some knowledge is present. A person may know a rule, understand consequences, and still prefer a lower good because desire is disordered. Socrates tends to argue that such a person does not truly know the good in the deepest sense. Augustine finds that answer psychologically incomplete. His own experience of conversion persuades him that the problem is not only seeing what is right but becoming able to love and choose it.

Adam and Eve

Augustine interprets the fall of Adam and Eve as a voluntary turning from God through pride and disobedience. They were not created with an evil nature. Their will was good but mutable, capable of remaining ordered or turning away. The temptation offered apparent goods—knowledge, self-exaltation, independence—but pursued against divine order. The act therefore illustrates Augustine’s general theory: evil arises through the misuse of a good power toward a lesser object in a disordered way. Later human beings inherit the damaged condition resulting from that first turning.

Responsibility and Contemporary Questions

Augustine’s account remains relevant because modern moral life also involves knowledge, desire, habit, social influence, and impaired control. Neuroscience and psychology complicate responsibility by showing that behavior is shaped by development, trauma, addiction, and environment. Augustine would not provide a complete scientific explanation, but his divided-will model warns against assuming that stating a rule is enough to change action. At the same time, his theology should not be used to ignore medical or social causes. Responsibility can be real while degrees of control and appropriate responses vary.

Critical Evaluation

The privation theory elegantly explains how evil depends on good capacities, but critics question whether it fully captures deliberate cruelty and catastrophic suffering. The doctrine of inherited sin raises problems of fairness, and the need for grace can appear to conflict with accountability. Nevertheless, Augustine’s analysis is powerful because it distinguishes being from disorder, recognizes the attraction of lesser goods, and describes agency as internally divided. He explains why a person can sincerely say, “I know what I should do,” and still fail to do it.

Conclusion

Augustine’s theory is influenced by Socratic and Platonic philosophy but is not simply Socrates restated in Christian language. Socrates links wrongdoing primarily to ignorance of the true good. Augustine agrees that no one loves evil as an independent substance, yet he argues that the will can knowingly turn from a higher good toward a lower one. Evil is a privation of good, while moral evil arises through disordered love and misuse of a good faculty. Habit divides and weakens the will, original sin damages human freedom, and grace restores the capacity to love rightly. We do have a will in Augustine’s account, but it is neither absolutely independent nor naturally sufficient. It is a created good whose freedom is realized most fully when it is ordered toward the good.

References

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