

Augustine's Will: From *On the Free Choice of the Will* to *Confessions*

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Introduction

In both popular and modern philosophical discourse, the will's freedom is generally an all-or-nothing proposition; either we have free will and are able to choose our own actions, or we do not. Debates about the nature of human freedom typically do not allow for degrees of free will. In his autobiographical work, *Confessions*, St. Augustine of Hippo provides an alternative understanding of the nature of the will that profoundly impacts his consideration of human freedom. Augustine argues the will has two parts – a part that issues commands and a part that works to enact those commands – that must work together to constitute a complete act of will. In identifying parts of the will that may interact with one another more or less successfully, Augustine suggests it is possible for humans to have incomplete freedom of the will on the grounds that the will itself is complex.

The precise nature of the will such that humans are unable to act entirely rightly was a topic that troubled Augustine for much of his career as a philosopher and theologian, from his early work in *On the Free Choice of the Will*, through later texts such as *City of God* and *On Grace and Free Choice*. Among these texts, *Confessions* provides a unique depiction of the nature of the will, informed by Augustine's reflection and examination of his own experience with the act of conversion. This autobiographical text, written as a prayer, details Augustine's intellectual and spiritual journey through Manicheanism and Platonism to his conversion to Christianity. In Book VIII, Augustine relates his intense inner turmoil in attempting to will to devote himself to God, vow chastity, and reject earthly pleasures. Augustine describes himself as

experiencing a conflict between a will to convert and a will to pursue sexual pleasures, writing, “my two wills, one old, the other new, one [fleshly] the other spiritual, were in conflict with one another and by their strife were shattering my soul.”¹ Augustine describes a seemingly paradoxical state, whereby he is partially willing two directly opposing courses of action: devotion to God and commitment to earthly, temporal pleasures. Augustine proceeds to describe the narrative circumstances leading up to his conversion while attempting to pin down the precise nature of his perplexing situation such that he is unable voluntarily will to convert without the aid of divine Grace.

While the depiction of a conflict of wills is particular to *Confessions*, Augustine's analysis of his predicament seems greatly informed by his earlier thinking in the three-part dialogue, *On the Free Choice of the Will*. In this earlier work, Augustine delves into the nature of human freedom and the factors that lead us to sin. In particular, *On the Free Choice of the Will* provides a foundational depiction of the role of habit in limiting human freedom after the fall. This thesis will attempt to utilize the depictions provided in *On the Free Choice of the Will* to more deeply understand the self-analysis informed conception of the will and its freedom presented in *Confessions*. Through this analysis, this paper aims to answer the following question: how does Augustine conceive of the operation of the will in both the standard decision-making process and in the exceptional case of willing conversion to Christianity? This paper further asks, what is the precise nature of this operation in the latter case such that conversion is impossible without divine intervention in the form of Grace? To answer these questions, I will proceed

¹ Augustine and Carolyn J.-B. Hammond, *Confessions*, Loeb Classical Library, LCL 26-27 (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press, 2014), para. VIII.5(10).

chronologically, rather than thematically, first analyzing Augustine's treatment of the will in *On the Free Choice of the Will* before turning to *Confessions*.

On the Free Choice of the Will provides an initial depiction of the wholly free operation of the will pre-fall, before introducing the ways in which habituation acts as a punishment, limiting our freedom to achieve salvation without divine aid. *Confessions* adds to this conception by describing the two-part nature of the will such that we are capable of willing lesser goods, though our freedom is restricted in attempting to will the highest good, devotion to God. I refer to these two faculties as the legislative part of the will, which issues commands, and the executive faculty of the will, which enacts those commands. While these parts are typically able to work together successfully to produce a complete, voluntary act of will, the case of conversion presents a unique case where the parts of our will fail to interact and thereby produce a state of volitional paralysis. In the special case of conversion these two faculties, always distinct, come into direct conflict with one another. The legislative aspect commands the executive aspect to reject earthly, temporal goods and pursue the highest, divine good. The executive faculty of the will, however, is so habituated to pursuing physical goods that it is unable to comprehend or follow this order. Augustine is left with a partial, rational will to convert and a partial, habitual will to not convert, at war within his soul. Viewing these two works together, we get a relatively pessimistic view of human freedom; while the legislative and executive parts of the will typically interact successfully and allow us to choose our own actions, this relationship breaks down in the case of attempting to will the highest good. We are unable to voluntarily have a complete will of devotion to God due to our habituation to living in the world.

The Conception of the Will in *On the Free Choice of the Will*

Augustine wrote *On the Free Choice of the Will* in two stages over the course of eight years. He composed the first section between 387 and 388 A.D., after converting to Christianity but prior to becoming a priest; the final two sections of the work were completed several years later, between 391 and 395 A.D., after Augustine had become a celebrated priest in Hippo. Augustine reexamined the text in his *Reconsiderations*, a reexamination of his earlier writings composed around 426 or 427 A.D. Augustine's differing discussions across the three sections of *On the Free Choice of the Will*, and his later writings on the text in his *Reconsiderations*, make it difficult to tease out a singular, complete theory of the will and its freedom. Augustine's thinking in *Confessions*, however, builds upon many aspect of the characterization of the will found in this earlier work. We ought, therefore, to examine the evolution and consistencies in Augustine's thinking across the three sections of *On The Free Choice of the Will* to establish a foundational view of the notion of the will that is expanded upon in his autobiographical work.

In *On the Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine examines the nature of the will in light of the problem of evil. How, he asks, is it possible for us to sin given that we are created by a wholly good God?² From the outset of the text, Augustine identifies the will as the origin of human sin and the cause of our doing evil.³ He asserts the existence of the will through an appeal to self-examination and example, citing to his interlocuter examples of willing something (willing to be Augustine's friend, willing to attain wisdom, etc.) that suggest the existence of the will.⁴ There must be some faculty, he argues, doing the action of willing these things. Augustine, it should be noted, employs a similar appeal in *Confessions*; in Book VII, Augustine writes that

² Augustine and Peter King, "On the Free Choice of the Will," in *On the Free Choice of the Will, On Grace and Free Choice, and Other Writings* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1.1.1.2, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&AN=317633>.

³ Augustine and King, para. 1.1.1.3.

⁴ Augustine and King, para. 1.12.25.82.

he, “was as convinced that [he] had a will as [he] was of being alive,”⁵ characterizing himself as certain of the existence of the will due to self-reflection and self-examination. Having provided evidence for the existence of the will in *On the Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine then proceeds to investigate the nature of the will and its freedom such that our doing evil is possible.

This project begins by outlining the most general picture of the operation of the will. Across all three sections of this text (and in *Confessions*)⁶ Augustine always depicts the will as directed towards some good, be it the highest good or a good that deviates from the true good in some way. In particular, early in the first section of *On the Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine says that that all people will to “live happily.”⁷ This characterization seems to present the will as operating in the following way: something strikes us as good and contributing to our happiness in some way, we will to obtain that good, and we voluntarily act in such a way as to reach that good. Though we may not all share a common conception of what happiness is, our acts of willing are always in pursuit of something that appears to us as having some degree of goodness.

Augustine further argues that there is a true good towards which our will ought to be directed. The object of the will, the good towards which an act of will is directed, may be understood as either in line with or diverging from the true good in some way. The goodness of the will itself is determined by the goodness of this object; a wholly good will is one directed towards the highest good while a less good will is directed towards a less good object. Augustine explicitly argues that a good will is one, “by which we seek to live rightly and honorably and attain the highest wisdom.”⁸ To have a good will is to live virtuously and devote ourselves to

⁵ Augustine and Hammond, *Confessions*, para. VII.3(5).

⁶ Augustine and Hammond, bk. II; Augustine and Hammond, bk. VII.

⁷ Augustine and King, “On the Free Choice of the Will,” para. 1.14.30.100.

⁸ Augustine and King, para. 1.12.25.83.

God. The object, therefore, of a perfectly good will is God, the highest good. Clearly, not all people possess perfectly good wills, as we often pursue lesser goods as opposed to the highest. On the subject of wills that fail to pursue the highest good, Augustine clarifies that all sins occur, “when someone turns aside from the divine and genuinely abiding things and towards changeable and uncertain things.”⁹ Evildoing, Augustine argues, is turning away from God and towards earthly, temporal things. Sin may therefore be understood as a matter of where the will is directed: either towards the divine or towards the earthly. Human wills are thereby more or less good to the extent they are directed towards or away from God.

Augustine’s thinking on the question of why humans turn away from God and towards earthly pleasures seems to evolve as *On the Free Choice of the Will* progresses from his earlier writings into the later portions of the text. In Book I, Augustine describes evil as, “nothing but turning away from teaching,”¹⁰ seeming to argue that all sins emerges out of ignorance. While teaching is good in that it enables us to learn how to overcome irrational impulses and direct our will towards God,¹¹ we often reject teaching, turn from God, and remain enslaved to earthly passions. Augustine expands upon this understanding of the role of desire in human sin in the following particularly vivid passage:

Lust dominates the mind and drags it back and forth, despoiled of the richness of virtue, poor and needy; at one moment taking falsehoods for truths and even making a practice of defending them, at another rejecting what it had previously accepted and nonetheless rushing to other falsehoods; now withholding its assent and often in dread of clear lines of argument; now despairing of the whole enterprise of finding the truth, lingering deep within the shadows of foolishness; now struggling towards the light of understanding but falling back from it due to exhaustion. All the while, that reign of desires savagely tyrannizes and batters a person’s whole life and mind with storms raging in all directions. On this side fear, on that desire; on this side anxiety, on that empty

⁹ Augustine and King, para. 1.16.34.116.

¹⁰ Augustine and King, para. 1.1.2.6.

¹¹ Augustine and King, para. 1.1.2.6.

spurious enjoyment; on this side torment over the loss of something loved; on that ardor to acquire something not possessed; on this side sorrows for an injury received, on that the burning to redress it. Whichever way one turns, greed can pinch, envy twist, laziness overcome, stubbornness provoke, submissiveness oppress – these and countless others throng the realm of lust, having the run of it.¹²

Augustine couples a list of the many ways in which humans reject often rationality with a list of the many earthly forces that may induce humans to turn from God if they lack proper understanding. The world, he argues, is full of troubles that entice irrational desires for earthly things. Moreover, gaining proper understanding and perfecting our minds is no easy task; it takes work to understand the true good and we may voluntarily reject this process in favor of the far simpler state of ignorance. Although our mind ought to be powerful enough to overcome lust for temporal goods, we are prone to allowing ourselves to be controlled by irrational desires. We allow ourselves to fail to know the true good and the true source of happiness and thereby turn from God, towards earthly, temporal goods.

Augustine argues we are justly blamed and punished for failing to gain knowledge of the true good and overcoming our irrational desires. In Book I, Augustine always describes willing to gain knowledge as entirely voluntary, presenting an optimistic view of the will's freedom. Augustine writes, "it lies within our will to either enjoy or to lack such a great and genuine good. For what is so much in the power of the will as the will itself?"¹³ The will, according to this statement, is completely within its own control; we are ultimately in charge of what good our will pursues, since we are capable of dedicating ourselves to gaining knowledge of the true good. While we may not have control over the many forces that make working towards this knowledge so challenging, we are wholly free to will to continue pursuing genuine understanding, even

¹² Augustine and King, para. 1.11.22.78.

¹³ Augustine and King, para. 1.12.26.86.

when faced with great difficulty. We are, therefore, praiseworthy or blameworthy to the extent that we will to gain knowledge of, and ultimately pursue, the true good.

Augustine further examines our praiseworthiness and blameworthiness in Book III, echoing what he says in Book I. Augustine writes,

If ignorance of the truth and trouble in doing right is natural to human beings, from which they begin to rise towards the happiness of wisdom and peace, no one rightly condemns this happiness for its natural beginning. But if someone is unwilling to make progress, or is willing to backslide from his progress, he will rightly and deservedly pay the penalties.¹⁴

As in the first section of *On the Free Choice of the Will*, this passage describes ignorance as the primary reason for human sin. Augustine again depicts failing to will to obtain true wisdom, thereby lacking knowledge of the highest good and willing lesser goods, as wholly voluntary. While we are not blamed for the natural condition of ignorance that may lead us to act wrongly, we are blamed for refusing to work to gain knowledge that will enable us to live virtuously. Following this passage, Augustine repeats his claim from Book I. He states, “Nothing is so much in our power as the will itself. Surely it is at hand with no delay as soon as we will.”¹⁵ Augustine again argues that we possess total control over our will and are, therefore, suitably blamed for remaining in ignorance, willing lesser goods, and thereby acting wrongly.

Though this depiction seems to repeat the view of the will’s freedom as presented in Book I, Augustine seems to amend this early position later in Book III. This optimistic understanding of freedom to control one’s will and voluntarily work to gain knowledge of the true good, Augustine argues, is applicable only to man’s condition in the Garden of Eden. Before the fall, man was in a state of ignorance that could be easily overcome through voluntary assent

¹⁴ Augustine and King, para. 3.22.64.220.

¹⁵ Augustine and King, para. 3.3.7.27.

to the transparent precepts provided by God.¹⁶ In their disobedience, Adam and Eve voluntarily rejected these precepts and turned away from the divine. Humans' current state of ignorance is dramatically different from that of Adam and Eve; we now lack perfect rationality and must work to distinguish true and false precepts. Following from this understanding, Augustine provides a far more cynical view of human freedom after the fall:

Nor should it be a surprise that we do not have free choice of the will to elect what we do rightly, due to ignorance; or we see what ought to be done rightly and will it, but we cannot accomplish it due to the resistance of carnal habits, which the vehemence of our moral inheritance has somehow naturally grown into. This penalty for sin is completely just: Someone loses what he was unwilling to use well, although he could have used it well without trouble had he been willing. That is, anyone who knowingly does not act rightly thereby loses the knowledge of what is right; and anyone who was unwilling to act rightly when he could thereby loses the ability when he is willing. For there are really two penalties for each sinful soul: ignorance and trouble. Through ignorance, the soul is dishonored by error; through trouble it is afflicted with torments. But to approve falsehoods as truths so that one errs against one's will, and to not be able to hold oneself back from lustful actions due to the relentlessness and torturous affliction of carnal bondage, is *not* human nature as originally established, but the penalty after being damned. When we speak of free will to act rightly, obviously we are speaking of it as human beings were originally made.¹⁷

While we are sometimes unable to take the correct course of action because we lack perfect rationality and do not know what is right, sometimes we are aware of the correct path but act wrongly because we have been habituated to willing lesser, earthly goods. Unlike ignorance, however, no form of habit existed before the fall; habit is a punishment imposed by God due to humans' unwillingness to utilize free will to gain knowledge of the true good and live wholly virtuously. The view presented in Book I of the text, where we are free to overcome our ignorance and act rightly, is a depiction of man's natural state in the Garden of Eden. Due to the misuse of this freedom that resulted in man's fall, we are now justly punished with a restricted

¹⁶ Augustine and King, para. 3.24.72.246; Michael Frede and A. A. Long, *A Free Will: Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought*, Sather Classical Lectures, v. 68 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 172.

¹⁷ Augustine and King, "On the Free Choice of the Will," para. 3.18.52.177.

will. Trouble, or habituation, is a newly added factor preventing us from acting wholly rightly, even when we have succeeded in gaining knowledge of the true good. Augustine revisits this passage in his *Reconsiderations*, discussing the role of ignorance and habituation in influencing the human will, post-fall. “This misery of our just damnation,” Augustine writes, “includes ignorance and trouble, which every human being suffers from the first moment of his birth. No one is set free from this evil except by God’s grace.”¹⁸ Augustine, again, characterizes our inability to act wholly rightly due to habit as a function of the fall of man. We are born ignorant of the true good, leading us to pursue lesser, earthly goods instead of the highest. Humans then become habituated to willing these lesser goods to the extent that we remain unable to act rightly, even if we gain knowledge of the highest good. We now require divine intervention in the form of Grace in order to achieve salvation.

Given Augustine’s depiction of the Book I position as exclusively prelapsarian, the three sections of *On the Free Choice of the Will* can be interpreted as fitting together into a more or less cohesive picture of the will and its freedom, both before and after the fall. Alternatively, one could read Augustine’s later revisiting of his early statements as an attempt to create a unified theory out of a work that actually contains an evolution, rather than a consistency. Book I could be understood as a reflection of Augustine’s Platonist tendencies and of his attempts at understanding accepted church doctrine at the time, while Books II and III could be seen as a reflection of maturation in Augustine’s theology, informed by his own experience.¹⁹ Regardless one’s position on the consistency of Augustine’s thinking across the three sections of *On the*

¹⁸ Augustine and Peter King, “Reconsiderations, I.9,” in *On the Free Choice of the Will, On Grace and Free Choice, and Other Writings* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), para. 1.9.6, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&AN=317633>.

¹⁹ Rowan A. Greer and The Society of Christian Philosophers, “Augustine’s Transformation of the Free Will Defence,” *Faith and Philosophy* 13, no. 4 (1996): 473, <https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil199613445>.

Free Choice of the Will, the depiction of habit and its relation to the will developed in this text seems vital to comprehending the conflict of wills described in *Confessions*. In *On the Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine explains that a particular sort of voluntary ignorance lead Adam and Eve to turn away from God and will earthly, temporal goods. As punishment for this disobedience and the misuse of our will, God restricted man's free will. We are now unable to voluntarily choose the good without help from God due to ignorance, of a new sort, and habituation. In man's current state, we lack transparent precepts that enable us to freely know the good. Even if we are somehow able to overcome this condition of ignorance, we remain habituated to lustful desires that prevent us from directing our will to the highest good without help from God.

The Conception of the Will in *Confessions*

Having established an understanding of the will and its freedom, as depicted in *On the Free Choice of the Will*, we can turn our attention towards Augustine's characterization of his conflict of wills. Many aspects of Augustine's depiction of his inner turmoil in *Confessions* seem to align with the views presented in *On the Free Choice of the Will*. Augustine describes, in great detail, his efforts at perfecting his understanding. He relates his extensive intellectual journey through Platonism and Manicheism, finally presenting his experience understanding and accepting the truth of Christianity. He writes, "no longer did I have that excuse with which I habitually contented myself, namely that I had not yet spurned the world and begun to serve you because my comprehension of the truth was unconfirmed."²⁰ Augustine relates that he worked to gain knowledge of the true good and had become convinced of the truth of Christianity and the Christian God. Following from the depiction in the later sections of *On the Free Choice of the*

²⁰ Augustine and Hammond, *Confessions*, para. VIII.5(10).

Will, however, Augustine further describes himself as still unable to fully will conversion.

Habituation, not confusion over which good – conversion or earthly pleasures – is the true good, is preventing Augustine from fully willing to devote himself to God. He writes, “my feelings of sexual desire were formed out of the perversion of my will. While my will was in thrall to sexual desire, it grew into a habitual behavior: while I was capitulating to that sexual desire it grew into something I could not live without.”²¹ Augustine describes a process similar to that presented in *On the Free Choice of the Will*. Initially, Augustine fell prey to sexual desires because of a lack of knowledge; his will was mistakenly directed towards earthly, temporal goods. Over time, Augustine became more and more habituated to willing sexual pleasures, even as he gained knowledge of the true good. *Confessions* builds upon the characterization of the effect of these forces, however, presenting habituation as contributing to a state of volitional paralysis;²² Augustine is unable to fully will either conversion or commitment to sexual pleasures, a condition we find no reference to in his earlier work. He is not experiencing “trouble” in holding himself “back from lustful actions due to the relentless and torturous affliction of carnal bondage.”²³ The role of habituation described in *On the Free Choice of the Will* could easily explain a scenario where Augustine vows chastity but fails in adhering to that promise and succumbs to sexual desires. Augustine explicitly states, however, that he is no longer engaging in sexual pursuits.²⁴ His habituation to pursuing sexual pleasures is not a complete will, nor is his new will for conversion; while he is not fully willing earthly, temporal pleasures, he is also not

²¹ Augustine and Hammond, para. VIII.5(10).

²² James Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue* (Cambridge [England] ; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 134.

²³ Augustine and King, “On the Free Choice of the Will,” para. 3.18.52.177.

²⁴ Augustine and Hammond, *Confessions*, para. VIII.5(11).

fully willing to convert. Augustine lacks the power to completely will either conversion or sexual pursuits. Further investigation into this curious state is therefore required to grasp how Augustine's experience with conversion diverges from or fits into the picture presented in *On the Free Choice of the Will*.

Book VIII of *Confessions* presents Augustine as unable to *fully* will to vow chastity, a condition which is only resolved, at the conclusion of the book, by the aid of divine Grace.²⁵ After setting out the narrative circumstances of his life at the time and presenting the nature of his curious case of paralysis, Augustine begins to dissect the precise nature of his condition. Augustine delves into his investigation of this paralyzing conflict of wills in Chapter 9 of Book VIII, an often confusing and elusive portion of the text that I have reproduced here, in its entirety:

Where does this perversion come from? And what is its purpose? Let the light of your mercy illuminate this question, and let me ask whether perhaps the enigma of human sufferings, and the darkened griefs of Adam's offspring, can reply. Where does this perversion come from? And what is its purpose? The mind rules over the body and is instantly obeyed, but when the mind rules over itself it is resisted. The mind commands a hand to move, and so prompt is the response that the command is virtually indistinguishable from the obedient response. Yet mind is mind, but the hand is part of the body. It is the mind, and not something else, that commands what the mind is to will, and yet it does not accomplish what it wills.

Where does this perversion come from? And what is its purpose, I say, that it should will something, and it would not so command unless it willed it, and still does not do what it tells itself to? In fact it does not exercise its will completely. For this reason it does not have complete command. Insofar as it commands, to that extent does it exercise its will; and insofar as it does not accomplish what it commands, to that extent it does really will it: for the will commands into being that will, which is none other than itself. So it does not have complete command, and therefore it cannot be identical with the things which it commands. For if its command were complete, it would not command itself to exist, because it would exist already. It is not, therefore, a perversion to be partly willing, and partly unwilling; but it is a sickness of the mind. This is because the mind cannot rise up

²⁵ Augustine and Hammond, para. VIII.12(29).

completely by means of the truth, for it is already weighed down with habit. So there are two wills, because each of them is incomplete, and each has what the other lacks.²⁶

Augustine begins the section by setting up his guiding question, which he proceeds to repeat three times over the course of the chapter. “Where does this perversion come from? And what is its purpose,”²⁷ he asks, questioning the origin and purpose of his inability to fully will conversion. What, he seeks to know, is occurring in the will to cause this paradoxical condition and why does God allow such a state to occur? He seeks his answer in, “the enigma of human sufferings, and the darkened griefs of Adam’s offspring.”²⁸ As in *On the Free Choice of the Will*, this line hints that Augustine’s curious state is attributable to man’s condition after the fall, rather than a natural limit on human freedom existing in the Garden of Eden. The conflict he is experiencing between rational and habituated wills is a just punishment imposed by God. This explanation, however, only provides an answer to one of his two guiding questions. He knows the purpose of his paradoxical state – just punishment for the fall of man – yet he does not know where within the will this predicament originates. What is occurring in the will, he seeks to answer, that causes his inability to fully will conversion?

Over the course of the remainder of this section, Augustine constructs an answer to this question by examining the nature of his current predicament in relation to the wills he is capable of enacting. He contrasts his capability to will and execute bodily movements to his inability to fully will and vow chastity. “The mind rules over the body and is instantly obeyed,” Augustine writes, “but when the mind rules over itself it is resisted.”²⁹ Expanding upon the characterization of the

²⁶ Augustine and Hammond, chap. VIII.9.

²⁷ Augustine and Hammond, para. VIII.9(21).

²⁸ Augustine and Hammond, para. VIII.9(21).

²⁹ Augustine and Hammond, para. VIII.9(21).

standard operation of the will, as presented in *On the Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine delves into the interaction between the will and body when pursuing a particular good. When his mind issues commands to his body, Augustine observes, the body immediately follows the mind's orders and produces the prescribed action. In attempting to devote himself to God, however, Augustine is unable to produce the action his mind is commanding.

Augustine says, "the mind commands the hand to move and so prompt is the response that the command is virtually indistinguishable from the obedient response."³⁰ Augustine identifies two distinct operations occurring when moving one's hand: a command and a response. The will, therefore, can be understood as having two distinct parts, which correspond to the previously identified operations; let us call these two parts the legislative part of the will, which commands, and the executive part of the will, which follows the commands. In the case of bodily movements, Augustine says, the legislative act of the will and the executive act of the will occur almost simultaneously. The instant the mind issues the command to move one's hand the body obeys and the hand moves. The legislative and executive operations of the will are virtually indistinguishable from one another; we perceive the will to move one's hand as a single, unified act of will rather than as a two-step interaction between these functions of the will.

This interaction between the parts of the will operates relatively smoothly in the case of moving one's hand, to the point where the distinction between these two operations of the will is imperceptible. In the case of the mind commanding itself to will conversion, however, this process has broken down. Augustine writes, "the mind is the mind, but the hand is part of the body. It is the mind and not something else, that commands what the mind is to will, and yet it does not

³⁰ Augustine and Hammond, para. VIII.9(21).

accomplish what it wills.”³¹ Unlike in the case of moving his hand, where the mind is commanding the body to do something, Augustine’s mind is attempting to command itself to have the particular will of devotion to God. This interaction between the mind and itself, it would seem, ought to be simpler than the case of the mind interacting with the body. One would imagine that an internal interaction within the mind ought to be easier than the case of the mind interacting with the body, yet the command the mind is issuing is not obeyed.

Continuing his investigation of this peculiar situation, Augustine asks, “What is its purpose, that it should will something and it would not so command unless it willed it, and yet it still does not do what it tells itself to do.”³² The legislative part of his will is commanding that Augustine convert, yet this command is not obeyed by the executive part. Augustine further explains, “Insofar as it commands, to that extent does it exercise its will; and insofar as it does not accomplish what it commands, to that extent it does really will it: for the will commands into being that will which is none other than itself.”³³ A complete act of will, Augustine argues, must involve both a command and an attempt at executing that command; it must involve both the legislative and executive functioning of the will. Insofar as an act of will possesses only one of these functions, the will is incomplete. “So,” Augustine writes, “it does not have complete command, and therefore it cannot be identical with the things which it commands.”³⁴ That the executive part of the will is not obeying the legislative part, Augustine clarifies, means that the legislative part lacks complete command over the executive. The two-step interaction between these parts in a complete act of

³¹ Augustine and Hammond, para. VIII.9(21).

³² Augustine and Hammond, para. VIII.9(21).

³³ Augustine and Hammond, para. VIII.9(21).

³⁴ Augustine and Hammond, para. VIII.9(21).

willing is not an automatic process within a completely unified will. The parts of the will, the executive and legislative functions, are disunified.

The case of moving one's hand demonstrates that the interactions between our distinct parts generally operate successfully; we are typically able to have a complete will and produce effects. In the case of conversion, however, the standard interaction between the legislative and executive functions of the will breaks down. "If its command were complete," Augustine argues, "it would not command itself to exist because it would exist already."³⁵ If Augustine already possessed a wholly good will, one dedicated to God, he would not need to command himself to have a good will. Instead, Augustine must rely on the executive part of his will to enact the legislative part's command, yet the executive part is not following this order. The disunity always present between the executive and legislative faculties of the human will, has become a direct conflict, preventing Augustine from achieving salvation. "The mind cannot rise up completely by means of the truth," Augustine concludes, "for it is already weighed down with habit. So there are two wills, because each of them is incomplete, and each has what the other lacks."³⁶ As in *On the Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine depicts habituation as preventing humans from reaching the true good, even when one is no longer in a state of ignorance. Augustine is left with both a partial will to convert and a partial will to not convert; neither of these partial wills can become a complete act of will, because the legislative and executive faculties are in direct conflict with one another.

At the conclusion of Chapter 9, Augustine has determined that direct conflict between the executive and legislative faculties of the will is creating his state of volitional paralysis.

³⁵ Augustine and Hammond, para. VIII.9(21).

³⁶ Augustine and Hammond, chap. VIII.9.

Augustine has expanded upon the picture presented in *On the Free Choice of the Will*, illustrating the internal operations within the will that enable humans to produce effects. We remain unclear, however, as to the precise role of habituation in preventing the legislative and executive wills from cooperating with one another to enable Augustine to fully will devotion to God. How we must still determine, does habituation function to limit human freedom of the will? In other words, how does habituation produce a conflict of wills that prevents Augustine from freely willing conversion?

On the nature of his habit for sexual pleasures, Augustine writes, “The law of sin is the brutality of habitual behavior: it drags and masters the mind even against its will, and it deserves this, because it sinks into such habits of its own free will.”³⁷ In describing habituation as both volitional and against his will, Augustine suggests that habit functions as a sort of continuing presence of a past free choices within the will. Wetzel similarly interprets Augustine’s understanding of habit, writing, “our present state of will...includes its past states in the form of habit, and therefore, the discrepancy between our past practices of willing and our present willingness for change can be expressed as volitional paralysis.”³⁸ Habit, Wetzel argues, is a sort of memory of past states of will. Our previous volitional acts, prompted by irrational desires and lack of knowledge, remain within us in the form of habituation and may prevent us from voluntarily adopting new swills.

This state, however, seems unique to the precise nature of the past and present states of will between which Augustine is torn: willing eternity and willing temporality. “The choice between temporal goods and eternity,” Wetzel argues, “is not some sort of choice that translates

³⁷ Augustine and Hammond, para. VIII.5(12).

³⁸ Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue*, 135.

into the simple selection of one object of desire over another. Eternity is not an object that a temporal chooser can select as if the chooser had the option not to live in time.”³⁹ Augustine is temporal and has always existed in the earthly, temporal world. Willing to dedicate himself to God is unlike any other decision he has ever made; Augustine is attempting to will something entirely foreign to his entire experience living in the world. How can someone dedicate themselves to something eternal and spiritual, having spent one’s entire life pursuing temporal, physical goods?

Augustine is in a state where the executive and legislative parts of the soul, each necessary for a complete act of will, have become aligned with opposing courses of action. On one side of Augustine’s internal conflict, the legislative part of his will is aligned with the eternal will to convert. This will is backed by the intellect and has the force of rationality; Augustine knows the truth of Christianity and knows that dedication to God is the only way to achieve salvation. Based on Augustine’s intellectual reasoning, his new will for conversion is so high-stakes that the legislative part of the will cannot to concede and command sexual pleasures. Augustine has, therefore, one partial will for a rational, eternal, soulful end. On the opposing side of the conflict, Augustine’s executive part of his will is aligned with the temporal will to pursue sexual pleasures. The executive part of the will, while firmly rooted in the soul, is unable to pursue a purely spiritual, soulful end because it is so habituated to pursuing earthly, physical things. Willing dedication to God would mean rejecting *all* of Augustine’s past acts of will, which each remain in his will in the form of habituation. The executive part of the will, therefore, can also not concede to the legislative will and fully will conversion. Augustine is left, therefore, with a second partial will for a habitual, temporal, earthly end. The two opposing sides cannot

³⁹ Wetzel, 133.

reconcile, and Augustine is unable to fully will either his partial will to dedicate himself to God or his partial will to pursue earthly pleasures.

Conclusion

Confessions, according to my interpretation, completes the picture of the operation of the will presented in *On the Free Choice of the Will*. In this autobiographical work, Augustine presents the will as complex and made up of two distinct parts – the legislative and executive parts of the will – that must work together to produce a complete act of will. Typically, we perceive something that strikes us as good, the legislative faculty of the will commands us to reach that good, and the executive faculty of the will works to enact that command. Attempting to will the highest good, devotion to God, presents a unique problem. As punishment for the prelapsarian misuse of our will, our freedom to will the highest good and achieve salvation is restricted. We now only possess a degree of free will rather than complete freedom. Due to the introduction of habit, the executive faculty of the will becomes so habituated to living in the world and willing temporal things that it is unable to follow the legislative will's order to reject the earthly and embrace the divine. Though we are capable of freely willing lesser goods, attempting to will the true good now results in a state of volitional paralysis. Only Grace can resolve this conundrum and enable us to achieve salvation.

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