Chapter 3

Voluntarism and the Self in *Piers Plowman*

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It is often suspected, of various works of fourteenth-century English literature, that they show the influence of philosophical voluntarism in the heightened significance they give to the will and its affective operations. This is an especially tempting thought to have with regard to *Piers Plowman*, both because of the poem's explicit engagement with philosophy and theology and because of the poem's choice to make Will its central character. It is Will, in Nicolette Zeeman's vivid phrase, who is the "single, holistic protagonist, the narrator and motive force of the whole text."[1] So although the extent of Langland's familiarity with the philosophical ideas of his era is a matter of conjecture, it is hard to resist the thought that he is writing under the influence of the fourteenth-century voluntarist movement.[2]

An obstacle to such claims, however, is that no one has ever produced a clear and systematic account of what the voluntarist movement was. I hope to do that in detail elsewhere, but here I will attempt something more modest: to distinguish between a few claims that might be associated with voluntarism and to consider some signs of their presence within *Piers Plowman.* A clear understanding of the philosophical character of voluntarism, and its implications for human nature, makes for a compelling case that we should understand the poem as the supreme medieval attempt to imbue an abstract philosophical thesis about the primacy of will with concrete meaning, set within the context of ordinary life. The human search for Truth, as Langland conceives of it, is not chiefly an intellectual journey but rather a volitional one.

SOME VARIETIES OF VOLUNTARISM

A rough start at delimiting the scope of voluntarism might distinguish between claims made about the *human* will, the *divine* will, and the *popular* will. The last of these three concerns the grounds of political authority, and voluntarism is sometimes associated with fourteenth-century political theorists who stress the role of popular consent in establishing political legitimacy. Here the leading figures are Marsilius of Padua and William of Ockham.[3] The second of these three broad categories concerns various ways in which God's will might impinge upon human affairs. Of course, the presence of God in our daily lives is taken for granted throughout the Middle Ages. But views that put great weight on the radical freedom of God's will are often associated with voluntarism. An interesting feature of these views is that they are prone to have destabilizing implications, calling into question our ability to understand the world around us and our place within it. A well-known example of this sort is John Duns Scotus's claim that most of the laws of the Decalogue obtain only contingently—that God could have made it the case, for instance, that theft is not wrong.[4]

Here I will set aside these two broad categories, and focus on the first and most prominent form of voluntarism, concerning the human will. It would be very difficult to give an exhaustive account of the many distinct forms of voluntarism that might be identified here, but some rough distinctions can be drawn. First, and most generally, voluntarists are united by their opposition to any form of physical determinism of the will, of the sort that the Stoics championed, according to which our choices are necessitated by the course of past events.[5] Inasmuch as it is hard to find any medieval philosopher who embraces determinism in this sense, the denial that the will is naturally necessitated is hardly a distinctive tenet of voluntarism. A second and more distinctively voluntaristic view would be the rejection of divine necessitation. This kind of necessity is explicitly found among medieval authors, most prominently in Thomas Bradwardine, who argues that everything that happens, including every act of every human will, is necessitated by God's eternal volition.[6] On its face, this seems incompatible with human freedom and moral responsibility, and so a characteristic challenge faced by many voluntarists is to find a way of squaring God's eternal foreknowledge and providence with robust human freedom.[7] These issues interact with a third aspect of voluntarism, which is its sympathy for something in the vicinity of Pelagianism with respect to the doctrine of grace. Although it is settled doctrine that grace is both required for salvation and freely given by God, voluntarists tend to be broadly sympathetic to the idea that human beings have some capacity to do the good independently of receiving grace.[8]

In what follows I will set aside these large theological matters and concentrate on three further and quite distinct commitments associated with voluntarism. The first of these, which I will call *anti-intellectualism*, argues against yet another sort of determinism: the will's being determined in its choices by the judgment of intellect. On views of this sort, which were widely held by scholastic authors, the will must choose that which the intellect judges to be the best course of action. Resistance to this sort of determinism takes various forms, as we will see, and is perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of medieval voluntarism. It leads, moreover, to a second sort of commitment, one that is less familiar but yet critical to an appreciation of voluntarism's broader cultural influence. This is the idea of the will as the primary locus of *selfhood*, which is to say that who we are as individuals is defined, first and foremost, by the character of our wills. This is an idea that goes back, as we will see, to the origins of Christianity, but it takes on new prominence in the fourteenth century. And that idea in turn leads to a third member of this set, which is that the will is the primary locus of *moral worth*, in the sense that our being virtuous or vicious, praiseworthy or blameworthy, depends on the internal state of our will rather than on what we do in the world.

One would hardly expect the first of these three, anti-intellectualism, to be defended explicitly and systematically in a literary text. More generally, it would seem to be the province of philosophy to address these sorts of technical questions about the causal relationship between the different aspects of the human mind, and between the mind and whatever outside forces impinge upon it, natural or supernatural. Indeed, to the extent that literary texts can be found to take up such properly philosophical (or scientific) questions, it is not clear why we should care about their answers. But in what follows I want to suggest that a commitment to anti-intellectualism leads very naturally to a commitment to the other theses just described, associating the will with both selfhood and moral worth. And inasmuch as these two commitments raise not just theoretical questions but also very practical questions about the nature of our lives and experiences, we should expect them to matter a great deal to anyone attempting any sort of narrative about the human condition. Here, then, I think, it makes good sense to look to literature for a nuanced development of these theses. In particular, I will argue, we should look to *Piers Plowman*.

INTELLECTUALISM AND ITS RIVALS

To understand the lines that run between the three forms of voluntarism just described—from anti-intellectualism to selfhood to moral worth—we might

start with the most well-known version of intellectualism, that of Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274).

Aquinas's contemporary critics, of whom there were many, often depicted his views in crude caricature, as if the will were simply a rubber stamp endorsing the judgments of intellect. In fact he offers a very complex and nuanced account of the relation between will and intellect, and scholars continue to dispute the extent to which it can aptly be regarded as intellectualist rather than voluntarist.[9] But it is clear at a minimum that Aquinas believes the will has a determinate teleological orientation toward the good: in other words, that all its choices are made under the guise of the good:

> The will naturally tends towards its ultimate end: for every human being naturally wills happiness. And this natural willing is the cause of all other willings, since whatever a human being wills, he wills for the sake of an end.[10]

This quickly points in the direction of intellectualism, for several reasons. First, it is the intellect, through practical reasoning, that decides on the best course to pursue in order to obtain a certain end. This is indeed one of the paradigmatic tasks of intellect, and so it would be bizarre to suppose that the will would be responsible for reasoning about which means to take to achieve a certain end. Second, the role given to the will, in this passage, is to want the end, and not just any end, but our ultimate end, happiness. To be sure, it is important to human nature that the will gives us this fixed inclination toward happiness. Indeed, the passage just quoted says that it is in virtue of willing this that we will everything else we will. But although the will is undoubtedly important inasmuch as it supplies this inclination toward our own happiness, it is not clear that it plays an interesting agential role. For this tendency toward the good is something that it wills "naturally," and so determinately. Hence the will's role in our lives is surprisingly fixed, and tends to be overshadowed in Aquinas's thinking by the role of the intellect in determining which courses of action will best promote our own happiness.

To avoid falling into crude caricature, it should be said that Aquinas's position becomes quickly more complex when one considers the story's temporal dimension. For although the will must follow the ultimate judgment of intellect, it is not just the passive recipient of the intellect's dictates. Instead, the lines of causal influence run in both directions. For what may seem best is for the intellect to continue deliberating, or to deliberate about something different, and it is the will that issues such commands. This does not ultimately mean that the will is in charge, however, because the will's command is itself a product of a prior intellectual judgment, which may itself be the product of a voluntary choice to deliberate. The process runs back and forth, over the entire course of an agent's life. Moreover, over the course of a life, both

will and intellect acquire various dispositions—virtues and vices—and these shape the ways in which the two faculties behave. Inasmuch as two of the most important moral virtues, justice and charity, are virtues of the will,[11] it can hardly be said that the will plays a secondary role in Aquinas's thinking. But even if that makes it somewhat misleading to characterize his ultimate position as intellectualist, it is certainly not the case that his account of human nature *privileges* the will as opposed to intellect. And what's distinctive of the voluntarist movement is precisely that it does in various ways privilege the will over and above other aspects of human nature.

We can see this sort of privileging at work very clearly in William of Ockham's (1287–1347) rejection of a view along the lines of Aquinas's. Whereas Aquinas holds that the will's teleological orientation toward its ultimate end is, as it were, hardwired, Ockham flatly denies this, writing that "the will is not naturally inclined to its ultimate end."[12] The implication of this claim is that the will has the capacity to reject that end, which is a claim that Ockham explicitly endorses, remarking elsewhere that "even with the intellect's judging that this is the ultimate end, the will can nill that end."[13] This means that the will can not only choose not to will its own happiness but can also positively will against happiness. It can will to be unhappy. This in turn has ramifications for everything that the will chooses, because if it can reject its ultimate end then it can reject *anything* that the intellect might propose, given that the intellect's practical judgments have force only on the assumption that the agent desires a certain end. This, too, is something that Ockham explicitly avows, saying that "the will can be moved against the judgment of reason."[14]

We might say that, for Ockham, the will is a much more interesting faculty than it is for Aquinas. Although Aquinas's will plays an ineliminable causal role in his theory of action, and serves as the subject for the most important moral virtues, its role is limited by its natural inclinations in a way that the will for Ockham is not. Whether or not this gives Ockham's will greater *freedom* is a question that has been long debated and need not be taken up here. But his anti-intellectualism gives the will itself a more important role to play in human action, by making the will's autonomous choice the critical deciding factor. The point has to be articulated with some care. After all, even for the most intellectualist of scholastic authors,[15] it is the endorsement of will (*voluntas*) that defines the scope of *voluntary* action, and hence the scope of moral responsibility. What's different for voluntarists like Ockham is that the *explanation* for why the will chooses one thing or another rests ultimately with the will itself. The will's choices are, to be sure, influenced by the judgment of intellect and by the various virtues and vices we accumulate over time. But whereas Aquinas can write that "it is by virtue that we live well,"[16] the voluntarists treat the will as an autonomous agent, which may or

may not follow the advice of intellect or the dispositions ingrained through past action.

THE WILL AS LOCUS OF THE SELF

Given an anti-intellectualism that attributes a heightened role to the will, it becomes natural to give the will a larger share in what we think of as our self. After all, our conception of self is largely shaped by the voluntary choices we make. So if it is the will itself—not the intellect, nor our passions or dispositions—that ultimately explains what we do, then the will accordingly should become of larger importance to our conception of our self.

This is not an idea that could have taken hold in classical antiquity, given that the concept of the will arguably does not even exist in antiquity, and certainly does not exist in anything like a voluntaristic form.[17] But we can find associations between the will and the self in early Christian authors, even as early as St. Paul. Consider this famous passage from his Letter to the Romans:

> For that which I do, I do not understand. For I do not do the good that I will (θέλω; *volo*), but the evil that I hate, that I do. If then I do that which I will against, I consent to the law, that it is good. *So then it is not I who do it*, but the sin that dwells within me. For I know that the good does not dwell within me, that is, within my flesh. For to will the good is present to me, but to achieve the good, that I do not find. For I do not do the good that I will, but the evil that I will against, this I do. *But if I do that which I will against, then it is not I who do it*, but the sin that dwells within me. Therefore I find a law, that while I am willing to do good, evil is present to me. For, with respect to the interior person, I am delighted with the law of God. But I see another law in my limbs, fighting against the law of my mind and imprisoning me in the law of sin that is in my limbs.[18]

The passage concerns actions that are, in some sense, unwilled. Paul describes himself as doing things that he hates (*odi*) and wills against (*nolo*). In cases like this, it is natural to say that the act is beyond one's control, or not one's responsibility. But twice, in the italicized passages, Paul makes an inference that goes much farther: If I act unwillingly, he says, then "it is not I who does it, but the sin that dwells within me" (7:17, 7:20). This is to say not just that my unwilled actions are not voluntary, but further that they are not my actions at all. In turn, that suggests that Paul strongly associates the self with its acts of willing. To be sure, he also speaks here of the "interior person" and the "law of my mind," expressions that also seem

to be associated with the "I" that is the self. And in contrast he points to the "flesh" and the "limbs" that lie outside the interior person. But even if the self is not wholly determined by the will, he at any rate seems to think that acts of will are the primary determinant of what I do and so, accordingly, of who I am.

From a philosophical point of view, this famous text is quite perplexing.[19] At first glance, it might seem to subscribe to the sort of Platonic or Cartesian dualism that identifies the self with the soul, and so consequently treats the body as something outside of the self. But whether or not Paul might accept such a thesis, he is not strictly committed to it here. Instead, he wishes only to disassociate certain *actions* from himself: those actions that he has not willed. When we focus on this claim, the obvious question becomes what sort of actions he is referring to? The answer that immediately suggests itself is that Paul is describing what philosophers today call weakness of will, where, roughly, we know that it would be best to do one thing, and yet we find ourselves doing something else.[20] Yet, on reflection, this is extremely problematic as a reading of the passage, for multiple reasons. For one thing, it seems that *Saint* Paul should not himself be subject to this rather grievous form of sin. For another, it seems that such acts *are* sins, and so ought not to be dismissed by Paul as acts that are not his own. And this is so because, finally, it seems that such actions are willed by the agent. When I stay up too late, streaming yet another hour of television, this is something that I *will* to do, which is precisely why I am aptly described as suffering from weakness of will.

The commentary tradition on this passage, aware of these difficulties with the obvious reading, has proposed another possibility: that Paul is talking not about weakness of will but rather about purely sensual impulses that are not willed because they are not *acted on* at all.[21] This would include the sort of fleeting yearnings, impulses, and mental images that even a saint cannot help but have, which arise in any human being, simply as a result of being human. (Or, in strict theological terms, they arise as a result of our living under the punishment of original sin.) These are the so-called venial sins, which one might well judge to be beyond one's voluntary control, and so one's responsibility only in a considerably diminished sense. Even on this interpretation, it remains somewhat startling that Paul wants to treat such "doings" (ὃ κατεργάζομαι; *quod operor*) not just as involuntary, but as not being *his* doings at all. But here we can see clearly in just what sense this passage subscribes to the will as the primary locus of selfhood. It is not that the passage is committed to a dualism on which Paul just is his will, or his mind. Rather, the scope of Paul's will is what marks off the scope of activities that Paul is willing to endorse as his own. As his will goes, so he goes, and if it happens that his body goes in a different direction, then that is not

AQ: Please check if this latter part of the sentence '. . . Paul just is his will, or his mind.' reads as intended.

something Paul takes himself to be responsible for, even granted that his body is a part of him.[22]

Once we associate the self so tightly with the will, it becomes natural to take one more step, and to see the will as the primary locus of moral worth. This is not to make the commonplace assertion that actions are morally evaluable only when they are endorsed by the will—that is, only when those actions are voluntary. It is to say, instead, that moral goodness applies, first and foremost, not to our external actions, nor to our rational deliberations or to our acquired habits, but rather to the will's choices. This is not a claim that Paul shows any signs of commitment to, but it becomes explicit among various later moral theorists. Most famously, Immanuel Kant begins the *Groundwork* with these ringing words: "It is impossible to conceive of anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a *good will*."[23] This sort of thought is completely alien to Aquinas, for whom *everything* that exists is good, just insofar as it has existence.[24] And even with regard to the narrow domain of moral goodness, Aquinas locates it no more on the intellectual side than on the volitional side, and associates it more with the virtues than with the faculty of will itself.

Among medieval philosophers, Peter Abelard (1079–1142) is very clear about locating moral worth at the place where we consent or form an intention to act, rather than at the action itself, or at our acquired dispositions toward action. As Abelard writes, "A person's intention is called good in itself, but his deed is not called good from itself, but rather because it proceeds from a good intention."[25] This view gets taken up by the voluntarist movement of the fourteenth century. Ockham, for instance, holds that the only necessarily virtuous human act is an act of the will.[26] The more one accentuates the autonomous role of the will in decision-making, and its preeminent place in moral agency, the more natural it becomes to think of the will as the primary locus of moral worth. Our various other features as human beings determine much of who we are: whether we are healthy and athletic, bold or shy, wise or witless. But on this voluntarist picture our goodness as moral agents is a product, first and foremost, of our will and the choices it makes. One finds this sort of position articulated very vividly in Peter John Olivi (1247/8–1298), one of the forerunners of the voluntarist movement, who writes that

> nothing beneath God is as beloved and as dear to us as the freedom and power of our own will. For this is a thing we value infinitely, we value it more than all the things that God could make, which are infinite, and more than anything that is in us.[27]

This is by no means the standard medieval philosophical conception of human nature, which tends to be far more intellectualist in its orientation.

But this is the sort of voluntarism that informs *Piers Plowman*, as I will now begin to argue.

HIGHER AND LOWER WILL

The obvious indication that *Piers Plowman* is written from within a voluntaristic conception of the human self is its identification of the dreamer as Will. This choice of names—always "Will" and never "William"—centers the larger psychological frame of the poem, as we will see. But to appreciate the significance of Langland's decision to build his poem around the journey of Will, it will be helpful to look briefly at how the terms "will" and "*voluntas*" are ordinarily deployed in medieval texts. For a modern reader, the voluntarist association of the will with the self and with moral worth looks perfectly natural. We commonly express judgments about personal agency in terms of our having "free will" or being "weak willed." Our tendency to elevate the role of will in these ways is a mark of the modern influence of voluntarism, but in the Middle Ages this influence had not yet so thoroughly taken hold. Medieval authors writing philosophy in Latin speak ordinarily not of free will (*libera voluntas*) but of free ~~judgment~~ (*liberum arbitrium*), and speak of *incontinentia* rather than weakness of will. Exactly how the will might be involved in these phenomena was an open question, and this was the very territory in dispute between intellectualists and voluntarists.[28]

For both parties to this philosophical dispute, *voluntas* refers uncontroversially to rational appetite, the soul's higher desire for its ultimate good and for whatever means are judged conducive to that good. On this Aristotelian picture,[29] the will is and must be involved in every deliberate human act, and so even if the will is not valorized as the principal part of the soul, it is at any rate a necessary part. In Middle English, in contrast, the will often does not rise even to this level of responsibility. Characteristically, instead, "will" refers to the lower human appetites that work against reason rather than in collaboration with it. This is most obviously apparent in the popular opposition between wit and will, a trope that appears over and over in Middle English literature. In *Sawles Warde*, for instance, from around the start of the thirteenth century, the allegory gets set out at the very start:

> This hus the ure Lauerd speketh of is seolf the mon. Inwith, the monnes wit i this hus is the huse lauerd, ant te fulitohe wif mei beon wil ihaten, thet, ga the hus efter hire, ha diht hit al to wundre bute Wit ase lauerd chasti hire the betere ant bineome hire muchel of thet ha walde. Ant tah walde al thet hird folhin hire overal yef Wit ne forbude ham, for alle hit beoth untohene ant rechelese hinen bute yef he ham rihte.

[This house which our Lord speaks of is man himself. Inside, the man's wit in this house is the lord of the house, and the unruly wife can be called Will who, if the house follows her, brings it all to ruin unless Wit as lord restrains her better and takes away from her much of what she wills. And yet still all that household would follow her in everything if Wit did not forbid them, because all are unruly and reckless servants unless he corrects them.][30]

The terms of the allegory would not necessarily preclude the sort of collaborative relationship between intellect and will that one finds within Aristotelian philosophy, but as marriage is in fact understood here, the relationship is strictly hierarchical. It is Wit who should rule and restrain, and if Will were to get her way, the result would be ruin: "ha diht hit al to wundre." This is not to say that Will plays a subsidiary role in *Sawles Warde*. The wife in many respects lies at the center of the dramatic narrative, and female readers might have been expected to identify particularly with her.[31] Still, Will can scarcely be considered the protagonist, for when the narrative finally resolves itself, the outcome is a one-sided silencing of Will in favor of Wit's authority:

Nu is Wil thet husewif al stille—thet er wes so willesful—al ituht efter Wittes wissunge, thet is husebonde. Ant al thet hird halt him stille, thet wes iwunet to beon fulitohen ant don efter Wil, hare lefdi, ant nawt efter Wit.

[Now Will that housewife is entirely silent—who before was so willful—fully guided according to the instruction of Wit, who is husband. And all that household holds itself still, that was accustomed to be unruly and follow Will, their lady, and not Wit.][32]

Nearly two centuries later, John Gower offers much the same picture of the relationship between wit and will, in his account of Diogenes' advice to Alexander:

This is the sothe thing:
Sith I ferst resoun understod,
And knew what thing was evel and good,
The will which of my bodi moeveth,
Whos werkes that the god reproeveth,
I have restreigned everemore, . . .
Will is my man and my servant,
And evere hath ben and evere schal.
And thi will is thi principal,
And hath the lordschipe of thi witt.[33]

Here the will is so far from being associated with the self that it is properly cast in the role of Diogenes's "man and my servant." King Alexander's fault is precisely that he allows his will to be the "principal" part within him, and to have "lordschipe" over his wit. That in Gower the will is now masculine perhaps implies that these lower appetites are not the privileged domain of either gender. But that the will is so readily gendered at all signals just how natural it is to think of the will as the locus of selfhood.

Semantically, the noun "will" in Middle English is ambiguous between these two senses: will as higher appetite, allied to reason and responsible for all deliberate action, and will as lower desire, inevitably in conflict with reason and so appropriately restrained if not silenced altogether. We have seen instances of the latter usage, but it is also easy to find Middle English uses of "will" in the philosopher's sense.[34] When the will is so understood, it becomes possible to give it the sort of elevated status associated with the voluntarists. Walter Hilton (ca. 1343–1396), for instance, urges us to abandon our selfish "proper will" in favor of a "common will" that adheres to the will of God.

> þis comen wille is sothefastly called þe maste precious offerande & þe maste dere presande þat may be gyfen un-to-god; and þarefor it is callyd erthely heuen, for qwy it herbers god. It is goddis tempill, it is þe chosen chambyr of Ihesu, it is þe hamely howse of þe haly gaste.[35]

Evidently a will of this sort is not to be silenced or ruled over, but is instead the crowning achievement of a human life.

In keeping with the ambiguous character of the Middle English word, one sometimes finds Langland referring to will as a lower desire meant to be suppressed. In Truth's castle, for instance, as described by Piers, "all the wallis ben of witte to holden wille oute" (B.V.587).[36] The poem's hero, however, Will the dreamer, is not meant to be held out of the castle—and this not despite his name, but because of it, inasmuch as a will, for Langland, is precisely that within a human being that has a chance of meriting entrance within those walls.

WILL'S JOURNEY

If the identification of the dreamer as Will is more than mere authorial signature, if it has the sort of conceptual implications that I am claiming, then we would expect there to be consequences throughout the poem. Indeed, the voluntarist's conception of human agency frames the entire narrative. A useful overview of Langland's conception of the relationship between will and agency appears in a metaphor at B.VIII.41–56:

The bote is likned to the body that brutel is of kynde   [brittle
That thorugh the fende and thi flesh and the false worlde   [Fiend
Synneth the sad man sevene sythes a day   [steadfast . . . times
Ac dedly synne doth he nought; for Do-Well hym helpeth,
That is charité the champioun, chief help ayein synne.
For he strengtheth the to stone and stereth thi soule   [stand . . . steers
That thowgh thi body bow as bote doth in the water,   [turns about as a boat
Ay is thi soule sauf but thiself wole   [unless you ~~yourself~~
                                                                 will<to>

Folwe thi fleshes wille and the Fendes after,   [as well
And do a dedly synne and drenche so thiselve.
God wole suffer wel thi sleuthe yif thiself lyketh,   [sloth
For he yaf the to Yeres-yyve to yeme wel thiselve,   [~~a~~ New Year's gift to
                                                                 guide

Witte a fre wille, to every wyghte a porcioun,   [Wit and
To fleghyng foules, to fissches, and to bestes,   [flying
Ac man hath moste therof and moste is to blame,
But if he worche wel therwith as Do-Wel hym techeth.   [unless

This picture accords quite precisely with the standard medieval reading of Romans 7. Our brittle body sins constantly—"sevene sythes a day," invoking Proverbs 24:16—but these are mere venial sins, consistent with a meritorious life, and so "thi soule <is> saufe but thiself wole / <to> Folwe thi fleshes wille . . ." Here from one line to the next we get the two senses of will described above: the higher will that controls the soul's destiny, set in opposition to the lower will of the flesh that should be silenced as much as possible. The self is not identified with the will, or even with the soul, no more than it is in Romans 7. But the responsibility for the whole human self—boat and pas-senger—rests with the will's choices, and whether it can escape the sort of "dedly synne" that threatens an eternal drenching.

To be sure, this is the account of the friar, one of the less reliable voices in the poem. But the friar's unreliability is a product of his volitional failings; he is ~~not~~ wrong in what he says, but in how he conducts himself. In general, indeed, the poem's voluntaristic inclinations are signaled by the relative ease with which the various speakers are able to offer intellectually adequate responses to Will's persistent questions. From the very first passus, Will receives perfectly correct answers, as when the Holy Church tells him that "It is a kynde knowing that kenneth (teaches/guides) in thine herte /For to lovye thi Lorde lever (more dearly) than thiselve, / No dedly synne to do dey (die) though thow shodest" (B.I.142–4). There is nothing wrong with this advice; it is in fact the same advice on which the friar is elaborating. Will, however, makes the same response to both the Holy Church and the friar, protesting

that he has "no kynde knowing" of what they are saying (B.I.138, B.VIII.57). This pattern, repeated throughout the poem, is liable to produce in the reader the very response offered by the Holy Church: "Thow doted daffe," quod she, "dulle arne thi wittes" (B.I.140).[37] But it is this mocking outburst that leads the Holy Church to offer the three-line doctrinal summary just quoted, which provides its own answer to the charge of dull-wittedness: the problem is not with Will's wits, but with the affective or volitional aspect of his character, inasmuch as the knowledge he lacks is something that "kenneth in thine herte." It is, therefore, quite appropriate that Langland sets his Will on this journey to find Truth.

Still, a will is not a whole soul, let alone a whole person, and in particular a will cannot function without an intellect to advise it. Hence the friar remarks that the gift we have been given is both wit and free will, both of which we must "worche wel therwith" (lines 53, 56). The journey Will takes is predicated on his very existence as a witless Will, a description that is no insult to him inasmuch as the will by its very nature relies on other faculties for its information. So it is that, over the course of the poem, we hear from Conscience, Reason, Thought, Wit, Ymaginatif, Anima, and more. Langland's complex use of allegory makes these characters more than mere philosophical abstractions, or characters in costume, because the allegory allows the poem to work simultaneously on multiple levels, situating Will within a larger community even while locating the will within an individual psychology.[38] That we can understand Will in both ways, as both a part of the soul and as a protagonist embarked on a journey in the world, is a consequence of the poem's voluntarism, and more specifically its valorization of the will as the primary locus of selfhood and moral worth. Accordingly, Conscience reacts to the friar's gluttonous behavior at dinner not by objecting to the content of anything the friar had said, but rather by affirming the matchless value of a true will:

> Ac the wille of the wye and the wille of folke here (that person, viz. Patience) / Hath moeved my mode to mourne for my sinnes. / The good wille of a wighte was nevre bought to the fulle, / For there nys no tresore therto—to a trewe wille. (B.XIII.190–3)

This serves to reprimand the friar on one level, but on another level it simply reaffirms what the friar had earlier taught through the metaphor of the brittle boat: what is all-important in a human life is the quality of a person's will.

Given that a will requires information from outside—that his journey is an exercise in what Elizabeth Robertson refers to as "soul-making"—it should be no surprise that Will's journey consists largely in consulting with various authorities, personified.[39] For anyone seeking to make strict philosophical

sense out of these dreams, it can look disconcerting that both Conscience and Holy Church are treated as personifications; that personification sometimes extends to parts of the self (part of Will?), whereas at other times it lies wholly outside Will. But the complex logic of Langland's allegorical scheme indicates just how seriously Langland takes the voluntaristic conception of the will as the primary locus of personal agency. From that point of view, the teachings of the church and of Conscience are on a par, both effectively external sources of information between which the will must navigate as best it can. Accordingly, Conscience can aptly be described as a book, and indeed the only book one needs (B.XV.534). And when Conscience announces his intention at the end of the poem to "bicome a pilgryme" in search of Piers (B.XX.380), and so seemingly to leave Will behind, we should not be surprised. Even parts of our very soul may go silent for stretches of a time, leaving the will to make decisions as best it can.[40] The multiplicity of levels on which the text works reflects the human epistemic situation, and the tangled mix of information we receive from within and without.[41]

Conceived of philosophically, a will needs guidance, and, within the literary context of a dream vision, one would expect Will to have a guide. Part of what makes *Piers Plowman* so disorienting, then, is Will's difficulty in finding a guide who is adequate. I have already suggested that the failure of these would-be guides arises not from any intellectual failing. Where then does the problem lie? That is not at all an easy question to answer, because the poem is very far from explaining itself in this regard—as if not only Will but also William himself finds the question deeply inscrutable. Why indeed does any of us find it so difficult to do well, let alone better or best?

Just above, we saw Conscience suggest that truth lies in the will (B.XIII.193). Might it be, then, that Will's search for Truth is at least in part an inward search? That would in turn explain why Will keeps failing to get from others the answer he is looking for. I say "in part" because the Truth, capitalized, is of course God. But Will's lifelong journey to find God is mediated by the search for the proper sort of love of God, which is what his would-be guides keep telling him he requires, all the way to the end of the poem: "Conseille me, Kynde," quod I. "What crafte is best to lerne?" / "Lerne to loue," quod Kynde, "and leue alle othre" (B.XX.209–10). Love is an act of the will, and the search for the right sort of stable loving disposition is a search for charity, which is a virtue of the will. If this is what Will is after, then he scarcely needs to travel far, because what he requires is something only he can supply.[42] Will's quest for Do-Well likewise has this sort of inwardly directed aspect, once we understand it through the voluntaristic perspective identified above, according to which right action is first and foremost the action of the will itself, rather than any sort of physical activity in the world. Will himself is perhaps confused, as wills so often are, even about

what kind of thing Do-Well is, but the poet's way of handling analogous adverbial constructions is illuminating. Wit's castle in Passus IX contains not just Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best, but also the five fair sons of Sir Inwit: "Sire Se-Wel, and Say-Wel, and Here-Wel the hende, / Sire Worche-Wel-Wyth-Thine Hande, a wighte man of strengthe, / And Sire Godfrey Go-Wel, gret lordes alle" (B.IX.20–2). This allegorical construction of a human person locates these various adverbial perfections *within* the castle, as faculties or virtues. But if seeing well, saying well, and hearing well are all perfections of a human being, then we should expect *doing well* to be understood in the same way, and of course we should expect it to be a virtue of the will. Will's search for Do-Well, then, is a search for something he can find only within himself.

To put the focus on will in this way, as the locus of selfhood and moral agency, is not to treat the will as alone in the world. Langland is of course not a solipsist, nor does he think that a human being is just a will. Hence it is quite proper for Will to set out on an intellectual journey, and to ask for help from everyone he meets. As I read the poem, we are not meant to conclude that Will's quest for understanding is hopeless or even misguided.[43] Although *we* are in a position to see that the answers Will is looking for lie within him, that does not make *his* task any easier. He is, indeed, going about his journey in the only way that a will in the world can: by attempting to make common cause with others, and by seeking in good faith to understand the things that are, for now, only dimly lit.

NOTES

1. Zeeman, *Piers Plowman and the Medieval Discourse of Desire*, 66.

2. Distinguished examples, with regard to *Piers Plowman* in particular, include Zeeman, *Piers Plowman*; Coleman, *Piers Plowman and the Moderni*; Simpson, "From Reason to Affective Knowledge"; and Robertson, "Soul-making in *Piers Plowman*." For a skeptical response, see Aers, *Salvation and Sin*.

3. On Marsilius, see, e.g., Nederman, *Community and Consent*; for Ockham, see, e.g., McGrade, *The Political Thought of William of Ockham*.

4. See *Ordinatio* III.37, in John Duns Scotus, *Selected Writings on Ethics*, 248–58.

5. For an authoritative treatment, see Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom*.

6. See especially Bradwardine, *De causa Dei contra Pelagium*, I.3, II.20, III.1–2, III.50. Unfortunately, this long and difficult work is available neither in translation nor even in a modern Latin edition.

7. There is of course a very large literature on these topics. For a brief and useful philosophical survey, see Normore, "Future Contingents."

8. See Oberman, "Robert Holcot O. P."

9. I offer an intellectualist reading in Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, ch. 7. For a sophisticated recent attempt to understand his view in a more voluntaristic light, see Hoffmann and Michon, "Aquinas on Free Will and Intellectual Determinism."

10. "Unde voluntas naturaliter tendit in suum finem ultimum, omnis enim homo naturaliter vult beatitudinem. Et ex hac naturali voluntate causantur omnes aliae voluntates, cum quidquid homo vult, velit propter finem" (Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1a 60.2c).

11. See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1a2ae 56.6.

12. William of Ockham, *Ordinatio* I.1.6, in *Opera*, 1:507. Unless otherwise noted, the works of Ockham that I discuss are not currently available in English translation. For a more extensive discussion of his conception of will, see Adams, "Ockham on Will, Nature, and Morality."

13. William of Ockham, *Reportatio* IV.16 in *Opera*, 7:350.

14. William of Ockham, *Reportatio* IV.16 in *Opera*, 7:354, 7:357–8.

15. The most comprehensive inventory of the intellectualist (and voluntarist) movement through the thirteenth century is the first volume of Lottin, *Psychologie et morale aux XIIe et XIIIe siècles*.

16. Aquinas, *De regno* I.16, in *Opuscula*.

17. Dihle, *The Theory of the Will*, locates the origins of will in early Christianity; Frede, *A Free Will*, points to late Stoic thought.

18. Romans, 7:15–23. The Vulgate text reads as follows: "Quod enim operor non intelligo: non enim quod volo (θέλω) bonum hoc ago, sed quod odi malum illud facio. Si autem quod nolo illud facio, consentio legi, quoniam bona (καλός) est. Nunc autem iam non ego operor illud, sed quod habitat in me peccatum. Scio enim quia non habitat in me, hoc est in carne mea, bonum. Nam velle adiacet mihi: perficere autem bonum non invenio. Non enim quod volo bonum, hoc facio: sed quod nolo malum, hoc ago. Si autem quod nolo illud facio, iam non ego operor illud, sed quod habitat in me peccatum. Invenio igitur legem volenti mihi facere bonum quoniam mihi malum adiacet. Condelector enim legi Dei secundum interiorem hominem. Video autem aliam legem in membris meis, repugnantem legi mentis meae, et captivantem me in lege peccati, quae est in membris meis."

19. For a good example of the perplexity that has been generated, see Matthews, "It Is No Longer I That Do It . . ." For a response, see Kretzmann, "Aquinas on Romans 7." Kretzmann in turn draws on Aquinas's commentary on Romans 7 (Thomas Aquinas 1929).

20. The classic modern discussion of these cases is Davidson, "How is Weakness of the Will Possible."

21. See, for example, Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1a 83.1 ad 1, and, at greater length, his commentary on Romans. For Augustine, see *Sermones ad populum* 154.3 (PL 38).

22. It is a telling sign of Aquinas's prevailing intellectualist orientation that he takes Paul's "I" in this passage to refer to his intellect: "'I' is understood as the human being's reason, which is principal within a human being, and thus it seems that each human being is his reason or his intellect" (Aquinas, *In omnes S. Pauli*, 7.3).

23. Kant, *Groundwork*, 9.

24. See, for example, Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1a 5.3.

25. Abelard, *Ethical Writings*, n. 91. See also n. 106.

26. William of Ockham, *Quodlibet* III.14, translated in *Quodlibetal Questions*.

27. Olivi, *De perfectione evangelica* q. 5, edited in Emmen, "La dottrina dell'Olivi sul valore religioso dei voti," 98.

28. The appearance of Liberum Arbitrium in the poem as an interlocutor with Will (at B.XVI and, more extensively, C.XVII and C.XIX) suggests the gap Langland sees between will and the supposed freedom that resides in rational judgment.

29. Aristotelian, but perhaps not Aristotle's. See the literature cited in note 16 for the broader question of the ancient status of will, and for Aristotle in particular see also Irwin, "Who Discovered the Will?"

30. *Sawles Warde* par. 3, following a revised version of the edition and translation in Huber and Robertson, *Katherine Group*.

31. See Robertson, *Early English Devotional Prose and the Female Audience*.

32. *Sawles Warde* par. 48, in Huber and Robertson, *Katherine Group*. For a discussion of other examples of the conflict between Wit and Will, see Dickins, *The Conflict of Wit and Will*.

33. Gower, *Confessio amantis*, 3:1270–83.

34. This is immediately apparent from the quotations offered in support of the first sense of "wil(le" offered in the online Middle English Dictionary <https://quod.lib .umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary>. Of course, the noun "will" has more than two senses in Middle English, just as it does today. The Oxford English Dictionary offers twenty-three distinct senses, and the Middle English Dictionary offers twelve, and does not even separate out into different entries the senses I am distinguishing here, despite their fundamental difference.

35. Hilton, "Propyr Wille," in Horstmann, *Yorkshire Writers*, 1:173.

36. See also B.XI.45: "That witte shal torne to wrecchednesse, for wille to have his lyking!" Ralph Hanna remarks, of B.V.587/C.VII.234, that "Piers's language at this point deliberately excludes the dreamer" (*Penn Commentary*, 2:200). But this ignores the clear equivocity of "wille," which here denotes a psychological feature set in essential opposition to wit, to be excluded from the castle as a matter of principle. This cannot be the sort of will with which the dreamer is identified.

37. See the nuanced discussion of Will as fool in Carruthers, *The Search for St. Truth*, 5, as well as David Aers's sweeping account of the significance of locating Will among the fools, arrayed against the institutions of power (*Beyond Reformation?*, 126).

38. On the complexities of allegory in Langland, see Mann, "Langland and Allegory [1991]." For the case of the soul's faculties in particular, see Raskolnikov, *Body against Soul*, ch. 5.

39. Robertson, "Soul-Making in *Piers Plowman*."

40. Here I am indebted to conversation with Kate Crassons and Beth Robertson.

41. That we acquire information from the senses, and from intellectual abstraction therefrom, is a commonplace within the Aristotelian tradition. The role of external authority is stressed in particular by Augustine, famously at *De trinitate* XV.12.21:

"Let it be far from us to deny that we know what we have learned from the testimony of others."

42. My thoughts here have benefited substantially from remarks in Simpson, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction*, 163: "If Will has never seen charity . . ., this is surely because he is himself, as the will, the locus of charity; to look for charity 'bifore' or 'bihynde' is simply to miss the obvious by looking in front of one's nose." For a detailed discussion of the will as the locus of virtue, see Kent, *Virtues of the Will*.

43. Here I agree with Aers, *Salvation and Sin*, 56: "there is no warrant for those readings of *Piers Plowman* that assert a movement in the poem setting aside ratiocination and argument." At the same time, the poem's voluntarism creates a certain tension in this commitment to rational inquiry, as is beautifully captured in Simpson, "The Role of *Scientia* in *Piers Plowman*," who speaks of "a deep uncertainty about the value of learning in the poem" (61).

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