

How the Will Became Free:
Medieval Voluntarism and Moral Agency

Robert Pasnau

O supreme generosity of God the Father,
O supreme and wonderful happiness of human beings,
to whom it is given to have what they choose and to be what they want.

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola

The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new.
Murphy sat out of it, as though he were free.

Samuel Beckett

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Introduction

Within the philosopher's bag of tricks, nothing charms an audience more reliably than the old problem of freewill. A mere illusion, the skeptic scoffs, and so it may be, but even so it is an illusion that has beguiled us for centuries. This study seeks to understand where the problem comes from and how it has shaped our conception of who we are.

The problem of freewill, in its modern form, is a construction of the later Middle Ages. Indeed, if the importance of an idea is measured by that idea's influence, then this is the most important medieval contribution to the history of ideas. A testimony to that influence is that the freewill problem is now so familiar as to require no introduction. That has not, however, always been the case. To think of our will's freedom as presenting a problem requires a particular conception of freedom and a particular conception of human nature, both revolving around a special power within us, the power of will. Today both this conception of our nature and this understanding of what it is to be free are widely taken for granted. But these are ideas that philosophers developed over centuries, and that appeared in their present form only toward the end of the Middle Ages, with the rise of the movement that has come to be known as voluntarism.

The inspiration for this book was my frustration at being unable to answer a question that has often been put to me, *What is voluntarism?* In the broadest sense, voluntarism refers to any doctrine that prioritizes the role of the will (*voluntas* in Latin). There are, however, many forms of priority and many different conceptions of will. As a result, this label has come to be used for a wide range of theories, concerning ethics, politics, human agency, and more. Here my focus will be on human agency. When I speak of voluntarism, I am referring to a theory that gives the human will priority in shaping our behavior. Even when the subject is so constrained, however, there remain many understandings of what voluntarism is, with the result that there is hardly any philosopher

from the Middle Ages who has not been described, at one time or another, as a voluntarist. Given that the term ‘voluntarism’ was coined only in the nineteenth century, this indeterminacy is not surprising: there can be no definite historical constraints on a term that medieval actors did not use themselves. No wonder, then, that some scholars find the label so unhelpful as to be best forgotten altogether. My argument, to the contrary, is that it is illuminating to assign to this label a very precise meaning in the medieval context, as a way to refer to definite ideas that appear at particular moments in time.

Although the label we use may not really matter, these ideas matter. The first and primary thesis of this book is that there are two distinctively voluntaristic ideas that emerge in the later Middle Ages, both promoting the primacy of the will. The first of these ideas is that the will is the controlling faculty within us, the principal source of human behavior. This requires, as a start, that we think of the will as a faculty, a conception that becomes commonplace only in the twelfth century. Once the will is facultized, it becomes possible to suppose that its principal function is to control human agency. This idea becomes prominent only in the middle of the thirteenth century. This idea of an *agential will*, as I will call it, is today so familiar as to be practically invisible, so much so that scholars have failed even to recognize it as a distinct thesis about the will. The modern idea of the will is so thoroughly agential that it is hard to imagine what it would be like to have a theory of will on which it was not the controlling agent within us. There is, however, nothing inevitable about thinking of the will in that way. Nothing like the agential will can be found in antiquity or the early Middle Ages. Although it is difficult to read these texts without smuggling into them an agential conception of will, in fact when early authors like Augustine talk about “a will” they mean something quite different. The agential theory of will takes clear form only in the mid-thirteenth century, in the writings of figures like Robert Grosseteste, William of Auvergne, Bonaventure, and Thomas Aquinas. Since these figures come halfway toward what I regard as the fully developed

voluntaristic story, I refer to them as *semi-voluntarists*.

The form of voluntarism that I regard as fully developed—the theory I refer to unqualifiedly as *voluntarism*—involves a second and more widely recognized idea. This second step, which comes not many decades after the first, introduces a kind of dualism into the created order, with the will on one side and all of nature on the other. What defines the natural order, on this picture, is that it operates according to deterministic causal principles, such that everything that happens is the result of causes that jointly necessitate that outcome. In the thirteenth century, with the rise of an Aristotelianism mediated by Islamic philosophy, that understanding of causation looked like a foundational principle for any plausible scientific worldview. It was, accordingly, thought to constrain human agency just as it constrains everything else in nature. Beginning in the last quarter of that century, however, Christian philosophers begin to resist this supposedly irresistible principle. There is the natural world, they argue, and then there are wills, standing alone outside the causal framework that governs the rest of the universe. With this idea, voluntarism comes into its own as a fully developed theory of human agency. According to the voluntarists, our actions are controlled by a faculty within us, the will, a faculty capable of controlling itself in such a way as to be free from the control of outside natural forces. The will becomes a prime mover, the undetermined self-moving first cause of human action.

The appearance of this second feature of voluntarism can be dated with surprising precision, to the year 1277. That is when Church authorities published a list of 219 propositions that were henceforth not permissible to teach at the University of Paris. Included on that list of condemned propositions were various theses that, in one way or another, seemed to treat the will as causally determined. In that same year, Henry of Ghent and Peter John Olivi circulated the first developed accounts of how the will could control human agency without being causally determined. For a few decades, this new sort of dualism between will and nature met with enormous controversy in Paris

and elsewhere, but by the turn of the fourteenth century it became unchallenged orthodoxy within European universities. The great scholastic figures of the fourteenth century—John Duns Scotus, William Ockham, John Buridan, and others—treat the thesis as settled doctrine and expend most of their energies exploring its consequences. Although the subtleties of the will's indeterminacy would be debated at length over the centuries ahead, the central tenets of the theory would not be seriously challenged until the Reformation.

Taken on their own, the commitments of the voluntarists are hard to accept. They ascribe to the will a *sui generis* power, as an undetermined self-mover, that is found nowhere else in nature. The very coherence of such a power is doubtful, and it is not clear that, were we to possess it, it would make human beings more free. It is no wonder, then, that ideas such as these had appeared very rarely before voluntarism appears in the thirteenth century. Why, then, did these ideas take hold when they did? And why do they continue to exercise such influence on the modern conception of human nature? A second thesis of this book is that voluntarism emerges in the Middle Ages because of the work it does in justifying the attitudes toward morality that shaped medieval Christian thought. During this period, moral goodness and badness are treated with a zeal, as I will call it, that is quite unlike the moral attitudes that prevailed within ancient philosophy. Within antiquity, from Socrates forward, morality was regarded as a subject of the highest concern, but as something that matters because it is tied to our own happiness. Those who go morally wrong deserve our pity, not our righteous indignation. Those who do good, in contrast, are simply manifesting wisdom with respect to their own wellbeing. In medieval Christian Europe, this ancient link between morality and happiness first weakens and then collapses altogether. The rules of morality acquire their status not because they are in our ultimate self-interest, but because they represent the will of God. To scorn the moral law is to scorn God. Such a fault has a badness that transcends all other sorts of badness, and so merits the strongest sort of zealous recrimination. To love the good, on the other hand,

becomes tantamount to loving God, and this is something we should do with all our hearts and souls and minds. The weight of moral goodness and badness is understood to demand an intensely emotional response, whether that be of righteous anger in response to wrongdoing, or of joyous love in response to moral goodness. To ascribe this sort of gravity to moral conduct requires a theory of human agency on which we are responsible for what we do in a very robust sense. The voluntarists offer such a theory, by describing a faculty of will that purports to give human beings an autonomy, a control over their actions, that sets rational agents apart from everything else in nature.

It is tempting to say that moral attitudes changed because of changes within broader European culture, related to the rise of Christianity. But what seems more plausible is that human beings by nature are strongly inclined toward this sort of moral zeal. This would suggest that we understand the Socratic tradition not as a reflection of the broader culture of antiquity, but as a rebellion against the usual human impulse to respond in harshly censorious ways to the perceived wrongdoing of others. Socrates's *Apology*, after all, hardly won over the jurors of Athens. In general, the high-minded moral attitudes of the ancient philosophers were thought of as paradoxical, scarcely believable, and far from the ordinary sentiments of the wider culture. When I speak of medieval moral zeal, then, I mean to describe not a special feature of Christian culture, but simply a regression toward the mean that characterizes many human cultures in many times and places. As medieval philosophers gradually recapture the intellectual sophistication of ancient Greece, they come to realize that they face a choice: they can either continue the Socratic struggle to articulate a kinder, more sympathetic attitude toward moral failure, or they can embrace the censorious attitudes of their culture. In choosing the latter, they discover that they need something like a voluntaristic conception of the will, to make their moral zeal intelligible. My aim is to describe the theory they construct.

This story continues to matter, because modern culture remains fundamentally medieval in

its moral outlook. For all the erudition that has been devoted in recent centuries to describing a less zealous approach toward moral blame—a line of thought running from Friedrich Nietzsche to Daniel Dennett—the characteristic approach to morality of our era remains intensely censorious. Our society finds it normal and natural to respond to the moral failings of others with a severity that can be justified only if something like voluntarism is true. Accordingly, for all the evident obscurity of the idea of the will as an undetermined first cause, our culture too *needs* this idea. Its charm reliably endures, even after 700 years.

Although my account pursues the technical details of these debates at some length, the story's importance transcends those details. Philosophical discussions of voluntarism spread out into the wider medieval culture, influencing not only how medieval people thought about morality but also how they thought about human nature. This is my third overarching thesis: that voluntarism reshaped the European understanding of our nature as moral agents, in a way that endures to this day. Over the course of the Middle Ages, human beings go from being rational animals, as the old definition had it, to being voluntary animals, persons whose behavior lies under the control of an undetermined, self-moving will. This transformation begins when the will, conceived of as an enduring faculty, starts to receive sustained attention within philosophy.

The voluntarists understood that they were doing something new. William of Auvergne, one of the early champions of the will as a controlling force within us, remarks in the mid-thirteenth century that

It is more than a little amazing that Aristotle and his followers, both Greek and Arab philosophers, have pursued with marvelous scholarship and industry the intellective power, which is far less noble. They seem in contrast not only to have neglected the power of will but to have not cared about it at all.... The beauty and dignity of human life consists above all in its rectitude and perfection. For this reason, they should have investigated it with all the

more interest and all the more diligence, compared to the soul's other powers, insofar as they could regard it as higher and more noble.”¹

As voluntarism develops, the will increasingly comes to dominate the human soul. The intellectualism of antiquity, on which we look to reason as the most noble power within us, now seems to omit the thing that makes us superior to the rest of nature. Once the will assumes this focal position within the soul, those aspects of our nature most closely associated with the will take on a heightened salience. Inasmuch as the will is essentially an affective power, what we love becomes more important than what we know. The goodness of what we do in the world matters less than the intentions that lie behind our choices. The sphere of moral appraisal—the defining question on which our eternal destiny hangs—shrinks down so as to concern itself chiefly, if not entirely, with the quality of our wills.

That voluntarism made an impact on the broader culture of the Middle Ages is beyond doubt. William Ockham reports laymen and old women disputing with scholars over freedom and necessity.² This influence appears as well in the literature of the era, and to explore that influence the later chapters of this study look in some detail at various works of Middle English poetry. We will meet a wife who subjects herself to the tyrannical commands of her husband, two lovers struggling to control their future in the face of a war that pulls them apart, a knight who wills himself to fulfill an oath even if it means certain death, and a poet named Will who spends the better part of his life searching fruitlessly for what it is to do well. These poems do not enter into the substance of the

¹ *Tractatus de anima* III.7, p. 95 (tr. p. 125): “Habet autem non parvam admirationem quod Aristoteles, sequacesque eius Graeci et Arabes Philosophi mira studiositate ac diligentia virtutem intellectivam quae longe ignobilior est persecuti sunt. Istam vero non solum neglexisse videntur sed etiam penitus non curasse.... In ipsius rectitudine et perfectione potissimum consistit humanae vitae decor et decus. Et propter hoc tanto studiosius tantoque perscrutatus exquirenda quam aliae, quanto eam superiorem atque nobiliorem cogitare potuerunt.” Translations throughout are my own, unless otherwise noted, although for the reader's convenience I cite English translations where they are available.

² Ockham, *Tractatus contra Benedictum* III ch. 3 (*Opera politica* III:231): “and so all things would arise of necessity and nothing would be entirely contingent, just as a great many infidels and ancient heretics taught, and as secret heretics as well as lay people and old women still teach, often contesting through their arguments even with men who are educated and trained in sacred texts.”

philosophical debates, or even express an opinion on one side or the other. But they show us how the ideas of the voluntarists came to matter to medieval lives, and to transform European conceptions of moral agency. Ordinary medieval Christians have a keen sense of just how little time they have on what I call the moral stage, the handful of decades in this life that settle for all time their prospects after death. Under the influence of the voluntarists, they come to conceive of their own will as the place where those prospects are decided, and they take themselves each to have a radical autonomy when it comes to the control of that will.

The idea of such control is both dreadful and ennobling. It is dreadful, inasmuch as it licenses the intensely censorious conception of ethics that shapes medieval Christian attitudes toward both this life and the next. But it is also ennobling, inasmuch as it promotes a conception of human nature that stresses its dignity and independence, and that locates our self-worth not in an elitist conception of reason, available only to a fortunate few, but in a personal autonomy that is the inalienable possession of each of us. Out of medieval voluntarism, in other words, comes the Enlightenment, with all its virtues and flaws (§12.5). Even before then, however, we find across European culture a new conception of what it is to be a human being on the moral stage, empowered by the possession of a will to seek one's own future happiness. Rich and poor, men and women, Christians and heathens all possess such a will, and with that comes the responsibility to use it properly. As these voluntaristic ideas spread across European culture, one finds a new kind of literature, featuring a new sort of person, an autonomous agent, responsible for their own choices, anxious over the quality of their will, while at the same time uncertain about just how much control their wills truly possess.³ This mix of anxiety and empowerment illustrates a phenomenon that runs

³ Renaissance scholarship has long supposed that there is something distinctively modern about the idea of the individual. For a brilliant critique of this notion, see Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, pp. 3–13. More recently, some medievalists have announced the origin of the individual within their own discipline. Although it strikes me as absurd to suppose, as is sometimes suggested, that the very idea of the self or the individual is invented or discovered during some particular historical period, it is not implausible to think that conceptions of individuality change over time. For various approaches to these issues in the Middle Ages, see Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual*, Kramer, *Sin*,

through both philosophy and our wider culture: that in various ways human beings both do and do not want to be free. We want to control ourselves and our future, and we want to avoid being subjected to outside forces. At the same time, we want our choices to be under the control of reason, to be in accord with the moral law, and to reflect the sort of person we have strived to become over the years. We want to be free to do what we want, and yet we want our wants to respect various constraints. The voluntarists describe a vision of human nature that celebrates our unconstrained freedom. Yet they accept, at the same time, that our lives should be governed by the constraints of law, religion, and morality.

Whether we have the sort of unconstrained freedom that the voluntarists suppose is a doubtful matter. Yet, even if the presence of such a will is an illusion, modern culture has often proceeded on the assumption that it is real. Today, as ever, philosophers pride themselves on their earnest inquiries into what is true. Yet, for the purposes of this study, the question of voluntarism's truth matters less than the way voluntarism embedded itself in medieval European culture and spread outward and forward, across the globe and into the modern era. In important ways, we are free just because we conceive of ourselves and others as free. Whether the conception of freedom we have inherited is a good thing is a question best left for other occasions, but it is a question that deserves to be asked. To adapt a remark by the biologist E. O. Wilson, the challenge of humanity is that while we have developed god-like technologies, we have retained our paleolithic emotions and a medieval conception of the self.⁴

This study aims to clarify the questions we should ask about ourselves, by identifying the conception of the self that voluntarism brought into existence. Even that much is not easy. Indeed,

Interiority, and Selfhood; Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity*; and Epurescu-Pascovici, *Human Agency in Medieval Society*. For a useful overview, see Blamires, "Individuality."

⁴ Wilson's oft-quoted remark is reported in an anonymous *Harvard Magazine* article from 2009: "the real problem of humanity is the following: we have paleolithic emotions; medieval institutions; and god-like technology."

the conclusions I have reached imply that previous scholarship in the field has gone badly astray: first, by failing even to notice one of the most important ideas of later medieval philosophy, the agential theory of will; second, by failing to see that it took until 1277 for philosophers to reject the causal determinism that had previously been taken for granted as an axiomatic philosophical principle. What makes it so easy to misdescribe voluntarism, ironically, is the movement's pervasive influence on the subsequent history of ideas. The way the voluntarists talk about the will is, for a modern reader, so familiar as to seem quite unexceptional, while the absence of such language before the thirteenth century is overlooked because we tacitly read a voluntaristic conception of the will into those earlier authors. Moreover, the way we express ourselves has itself absorbed these later medieval sensibilities. Across many languages, it is difficult to talk about ideas of *will* and *freedom* without importing into the conversation a voluntaristic conception of agency and indeterminacy. As a result, it takes considerable effort to translate earlier philosophers into modern languages without making them sound as if they too have a voluntaristic conception of the will. This means that, for the casual reader of the history of philosophy in translation, the rise of voluntarism is virtually invisible.

To get an initial sense of the difficulties, compare the following two passages. First, consider Augustine, from the late fourth century:

Someone who has a good will has that which is to be preferred by far over all earthly kingdoms and all bodily pleasures. Someone who does not have this, in contrast, lacks what is superior to all the goods that do not lie within our power, the very thing that a will alone gives to him through its very self.⁵

⁵ *De libero arbitrio* I.12.26: "quam [voluntatem] quisque cum habet bonam, id certe habet, quod terrenis omnibus regnis voluptatibusque omnibus corporis longe anteponendum sit. Quisquis autem non habet, caret profecto illa re, quam praestantior omnibus bonis in potestate nostra non constitutis sola illi voluntas per se ipsam daret." For further discussion, see §1.4.

Here we find a celebration of the transcendent value of a will when it is good, and a statement of the sufficiency of will to obtain such goodness. Compare that passage to this one, written by Peter John Olivi some 900 years later:

Nothing beneath God is as beloved and as dear to us as the freedom and control that belongs to our will. For this is a thing we value infinitely, for we value it more than all the things that God can do, which are infinite, and more than anything that is in us.⁶

Olivi also celebrates the will in the loftiest of terms, and on the face of things these two authors might seem to express a very similar thought. On close inspection, however, their two claims of supreme value for “will” reveal the nearly millennial gap that separates them. What Augustine describes as superior to all other goods is our caring about the right sorts of things, our having the right sorts of volitions. He uses ‘will’ (*voluntas*) to refer to any of the often-conflicting desires that shape our lives. When he talks about our free choice in this connection, he means to query whether he, as a human being, has the freedom to control those volitions. Olivi agrees on the preeminent value of our affective, desiderative states, and he agrees that freedom comes from having control over them. But the control he has in mind resides not at the level of the whole person but within the will. Hence the supreme value he identifies lies not with the volitions themselves but with the will, where that is understood as a persisting faculty of the soul that has control over our volitions in virtue of its power to serve as an unmoved self-mover within the soul. These are utterly distinct conceptions of human nature and moral agency, but to modern eyes, reading through the lens of a modern language, their claims look almost indistinguishable.

Augustine, though he would be massively influential on later medieval theories of the will,

⁶ *De perfectione evangelica* q. 5 (in Emmen, “La dottrina dell’Olivi,” p. 98): “Sed nihil sub Deo est nobis ita dilectum et carum sicut libertas et dominium voluntatis nostrae. Hoc enim infinite appetiamur; appetiamur enim illud plus quam omnia quae Deus posset facere, quae sunt infinita, et plus quam aliquid quod sit in nobis.” I return to this passage in §12.4.

gives little weight to the will in the sense that later comes to be dominant. Olivi, on the other hand, along with Henry of Ghent, is one of the two great founders of voluntarism in its fully developed form. Their conception of will marks the culmination of a sudden and transformative break from earlier medieval thinking about human nature. Over the course of a few decades, the will becomes the prime source of agency within us and then gets set free from the deterministic framework of nature. By the middle of the thirteenth century, the ancient tradition of intellectualism can hardly be found within European philosophy.

* * *

The argument of this book unfolds over twelve chapters divided into three parts. The first part sets out the antecedents from which voluntarism emerges: (1) a theory of freedom; (2) a theory of will; (3) the ascription to the will of agential control; and (4) the causal determinism that was a bedrock assumption of philosophy before the rise of voluntarism. Part Two goes into the technical details of how scholastic philosophers, within the medieval university, explained the will's special sort of indeterminacy: (5) how early scholastics argued for the compatibility of freedom and determinism; (6) the beginnings of the movement to free the will from the deterministic workings of nature; (7) the complex debate over how the will could be in control and yet undetermined, which turns on the cogency of the will's controlling itself. Part Three then considers what is at stake in these debates. Here moral agency takes center stage: (8) the scope and limits of alternative possibilities; (9) the role of right reason; (10) the rejection of happiness as our ultimate end; (11) the inward orientation of medieval ethics; and (12) the voluntarists' tendency to blur the distinction between the will and the self.

My initial plan was to write a still more comprehensive study, a unified account of the many different things that are associated with voluntarism, from the later Middle Ages into the early modern period. The book has turned out to be narrower, encompassing only voluntarism as a

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theory of freewill and focusing on the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Those two centuries were enough, I decided, because all the core questions that surround the rise of freewill voluntarism are developed in sophisticated detail by the middle of the fourteenth century. As for other forms of voluntarism, I ultimately decided that, despite sharing a name, they in fact raise quite distinct philosophical issues that could not profitably be discussed, except in passing, within the same study. I also pass over, largely in silence, many of the great theological questions that interact with voluntarism. Debates over freewill and determinism are closely tied, during this period, with questions about God's foreknowledge and providence, and with questions about grace and salvation. The rise of voluntarism matters enormously to these theological debates, and one can hardly claim to have studied medieval voluntarism comprehensively without going deeply into such matters. Although I was sorely tempted to pursue that sort of comprehensive narrative, I ultimately decided to confine myself to a more narrowly philosophical perspective.

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Two appendices are intended to help readers navigate the complexities of this volume. The *Chronological Guide* situates in time the authors most prominently discussed and offers a quick summary of the role they play in the book's argument. The *Glossary* explains the technical concepts and doctrines that the book relies on. These guides are intended both to give readers a quick point of reference, and to offer a kind of study guide for readers seeking to grasp the book's argument as a whole. For authors and concepts not found in these appendices, see the indexes.