

# FREEDOM BEYOND OUR CHOOSING: AUGUSTINE ON THE WILL AND ITS OBJECTS

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“Freedom is *dependent* on the existence of things of intrinsic value. A world of mere options is a world without the possibility of freedom.”

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The question concerning freedom warrants the same response Augustine gave to the question concerning time: “I know well enough what it is, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked what it is and try to explain, I am baffled.”<sup>1</sup> Servais Pinckaers has observed that, since it lies at the heart of any activity that belongs most intimately to us, we have a profound grasp of the meaning of freedom; but he adds, nevertheless: “[a]t the same time, freedom is what we know least, for no idea can encompass it, no piling up of concepts reveal it adequately.”<sup>2</sup> Precisely because it is *freedom*, we have difficulty giving a single determinate account of it; the term gathers up quite a variety of experiences, events, and realities without for all that disappearing into pure equivocity. Common political discourse, however, tends to neglect the real mystery of freedom, and contents itself instead with a paltry share of a rich

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<sup>1</sup>Augustine, *Confessions* [= *Conf.*], XI, 14 [translated by R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), 264. All citations of the *Confessions* in the present essay are from this translation].

<sup>2</sup>Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, translated by Sr. Mary Thomas Noble, O.P. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 328.

philosophical legacy, reducing the notion to the mere capacity to choose or determine oneself. What we debate in the political sphere is rarely whether this is an adequate conception of freedom, but most often if and to what extent the power to choose ought to be regulated, how to ensure this power to the greatest number of people, and what are the most effective means of multiplying options in order to increase this power.

Behind the view of freedom presupposed by such debates lies a particular conception of will, namely, as an essentially self-directing faculty which operates independently of any external factors, as well as of the other faculties constituting the human psyche. St. Augustine, who was called by Hannah Arendt the “first philosopher of the will,”<sup>3</sup> is typically credited with being the source of this view. In a well-regarded book on the subject, Albrecht Dihle claims that “St. Augustine was, in fact, the inventor of our modern notion of the will.”<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the major Greek thinkers who understood themselves to be giving a sufficient account of human activity through the interplay of reason and the passions, Augustine—for a number of reasons, including his own moral experience as depicted in the *Confessions*, the usage made of the technical term “voluntas” in Roman law, and developments in trinitarian theology—recognized the need to appeal to an additional faculty. We act the way we do, not because our passions drive us or our reason apprehends what is best, but ultimately because of what we choose. “From St. Augustine’s reflections,” Dihle says, “emerged the concept of a human will, prior to and independent of the act of intellectual cognition, yet fundamentally different from sensual and irrational emotion.”<sup>5</sup> The will is, in other words, the autonomous power of choice, and thus ultimately accountable only to itself.

Now, while this may be our modern concept of the will, I suggest that it is not an adequate description of Augustine’s conception. In the essay that follows, I wish to challenge this description, both because it does not do justice to Augustine’s full view, and also because, unless it is qualified, it yields an extremely problematic

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<sup>3</sup>Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 2: *Willing* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 84–110.

<sup>4</sup>Albrecht Dihle, *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 144.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 127.

notion of freedom.<sup>6</sup> Augustine, I hope to show, far from being the original author of the conventional modern notion of freedom, offers resources for a significant alternative. Needless to say, there is no room in the present context for a systematic account of Augustine's views on the will and freedom, which in any event would lie beyond my competence. I intend, instead, to think through the philosophical implications of issues raised by the conventional notion of freedom, and in particular the role of choice in that view, in the light of insights from Augustine and texts from some of his commentators.

### 1. *A possible interpretation, and its consequences*

Let us begin by sketching a plausible interpretation of Augustine's notion of free will. In book III of *De Libero Arbitrio*, Augustine uses the example of a falling stone to illustrate the difference between a natural movement and a voluntary one. A stone is compelled by its nature to move downward. We cannot "blame" the stone for its action, Augustine remarks, without showing ourselves to be more senseless than the stone itself. But we *can* hold a human being responsible for his or her actions, and we can do so because human beings possess a will, which makes their action, in principle, not dictated by their nature but voluntary. While Augustine does not deny that there is a movement that is natural to the will (an assertion that has vast implications, to be discussed later), he insists that the will is ultimately not *compelled* by its nature the way a stone is: it is free to follow its natural movement or not. The will acts, not by necessity, but by its own forces.

What is it that causes a person to choose one thing rather than another? To answer this question, we might wish to appeal to a reason, or to a desire, or to some other prompting of nature. But Augustine observes that, if the will has the power either to assent to or resist any desire or reason, there would have to be a further reason

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<sup>6</sup>The criticism presented in this essay owes much to James Wetzel's *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), a book brought to my attention by Michael Hanby. Where my proposal differs from Wetzel's will be indicated when appropriate.

behind one's assent or refusal, i.e., a further cause of the cause: "You are asking about the cause of the will itself," he explains to Evodius, his interlocutor. "Suppose I could find this cause? Wouldn't we then have to look for the cause of this cause? What limit will there be on this search?"<sup>7</sup> In order to avoid an infinite regression, he concludes, we have to consider the will to be, in some sense, a cause of itself, thus requiring no further cause to explain it in turn. It follows that, whatever else we may say to give an account of a particular human action, we must ultimately end with an appeal to the will as its original source.<sup>8</sup>

For Augustine, it would seem to be precisely the will's character as *causa sui* that makes it free. A stone is determined in its action by its nature; a will is determined—according to this interpretation—only by itself. While nature, desires, or reasons are things we cannot be said ultimately to be responsible for, the movement of our will is due to us alone. There is "nothing so completely in our power as the will itself," Augustine affirms, and adds that "since it is in our power, we are free with respect to it."<sup>9</sup> It thus appears that Augustine equates freedom with power, specifically, the power of determination. To say that we have free will would seem to mean nothing else but that we have the power to determine ourselves, and that this is what makes us responsible agents. Indeed, given Augustine's account just presented, we would be tempted to say that there is nothing that belongs to us more profoundly than our will, there is nothing more intimate to us than this freedom. Because there is nothing in heaven or on earth over which we have more control than that by which we have whatever control we have, what lies at the very core of our being is our power to choose, our free will. Augustine, on this view, would have anticipated by more than a thousand years Jean-Paul Sartre's assertion:

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<sup>7</sup>Augustine, *De Libero Arbitrio* [= *De lib.*], III, 17 [*On Free Choice of the Will*, translated by Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 104. All citations of *De lib.* in the present essay are taken from this translation].

<sup>8</sup>Karl Ubl, "Verantwortlichkeit und autonomes Handeln: zur Entwicklung zweier Freiheitsbegriffe von Augustinus bis Thomas von Aquino," in *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 46 1-2 (1999): 79-114, here: 86.

<sup>9</sup>*De lib.*, III, 3 [77].

“My freedom is not an added quality or a property of my nature; it is the very stuff of my being.”<sup>10</sup>

Now, the reason for the subjunctive mode of these inferences is that this sketch represents a very partial interpretation of Augustine’s notion of free will, and ignores a good deal of qualifying affirmations regarding freedom and the will, not only in *De Libero Arbitrio*, but in Augustine’s thought more generally. But I have sketched it thus both because this view of freedom resonates quite clearly with our familiar modern notion—freedom as the ability to choose—and also because Augustine says enough along these lines to make it a possible way to interpret him. We know that it is possible, because it is actual: a translator of *De Libero Arbitrio*, defining “libertarianism” as the claim that human beings have “metaphysical freedom,” which he in turn defines as “the freedom to choose in a way that is not determined by anything outside my control,” hails Augustine as “one of the great defenders of libertarianism; indeed, he was the first to articulate the view clearly.”<sup>11</sup> The will, the translator continues, “is not determined by any external factors. Only the will can determine itself to choose.”<sup>12</sup> This interpretation is echoed, moreover, in Alasdair MacIntyre, who affirms in his own explication of Augustine’s position that “[t]he will, being anterior to reason, has at the most fundamental level no reason for its biddings.”<sup>13</sup> MacIntyre draws on Dihle, who claims that the inspiration for Augustine’s “discovery” of the will was in part the biblical notion of God as creator *ex nihilo*, a notion absent to the Greeks. Just as God willed to create without prior cause, so too human beings will without prior cause.<sup>14</sup> This spontaneity of the will, which neither Plato nor Aristotle would have had the conceptual means to recognize, is precisely what stamps it as free.

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<sup>10</sup>Quoted, without indication of source, in Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 332. Claude Romano explicates Sartre’s view of freedom as a logical working-out of Augustine’s notion: see “La liberté sartrienne, ou le rêve d’Adam,” *Archives de Philosophie* 63 (2000): 468–93.

<sup>11</sup>Thomas Williams, “Introduction” to *On Free Choice of the Will*, xi.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., xii.

<sup>13</sup>Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 156.

<sup>14</sup>Dihle, 127.

But how is it possible to reconcile this spontaneity with Augustine's consistent affirmation of the will's having an intrinsic nature that inclines it—prior to any choice—to seek fulfillment in what it believes to be good? The passages from Augustine we discussed above, in which he lays emphasis on the spontaneity of choice, pertain in fact to a very specific aspect of the broader issue of the will, namely, the role of choice in the possibility of sin. We must keep in mind, as Mary Clark has pointed out, the limited scope of *De Libero Arbitrio*: it is not entitled *De Libertate*<sup>15</sup>—nor, we might add, *De Voluntate*. To derive an interpretation of Augustine primarily from this text, then, would be short-sighted.<sup>16</sup> What alternatives stand before us if we seek to take a broader view?

First, we must decide whether the will is ordered to the good in an *a priori* way. On the one hand, we could simply deny that the will has any intrinsic nature, but is essentially “self-creating.” We will discuss the problems that arise from this direction of interpretation below. On the other hand, we could admit that the will is intrinsically ordered to the good. Doing so opens up another crossroads for interpretation. We may affirm, on the one hand, that freedom means the ability to be determined by nothing but oneself, in which case we are free only when we *reject* the good to which the will is *a priori* determined. This path leads to the identification of sin and freedom, which follows the logic of the assumptions even as it defies common sense. Georg Kohler, for example, has forced Augustine into this direction: “The human will in its created character is free only to the extent that it says ‘no’ and thus becomes the origin of evil, and is in no way free if it remains related to God and the good.”<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, we could refuse to identify freedom with the simple power to choose, and integrate that power

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<sup>15</sup>Mary Clark, *Augustine, Philosopher of Freedom* (New York: Desclee Company, 1958), 149.

<sup>16</sup>T. D. J. Chappell, in *Aristotle and Augustine on Freedom: Two Theories of Freedom, Voluntary Action and Akrasia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), argues that when Augustine appears to give the will the role of wholly autonomous activity, which has been emphasized by Brown, Dihle, MacIntyre, Thonnard, and others, he is in fact not talking about the will *per se*, but only the “bad will.” The will in its proper activity, he claims, is hardly autonomous.

<sup>17</sup>Georg Kohler, “Selbstbezug, Selbsttranszendenz und die Nichtigkeit der Freiheit: Zur augustinischen Theorie des Bösen in *De civitate Dei* XII,” *Studia Philosophica* 52 (1993): 67–79, here: 78.

within a fuller conception that affirms both the will's ordering to the good *and* its power to determine itself. Only this final possibility will do justice to Augustine's view. Before exploring what it entails, however, we will consider the problems that necessarily arise from a notion of the will as a *causa sui* to the exclusion of any external or prior determination, and therefore of any intrinsic ordering. Our analysis here will draw principally from Servais Pinckaers' *The Sources of Christian Ethics* and Iris Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good*.<sup>18</sup>

There are at least three problems that would arise if we interpret "self-determination" as meaning "not determined by another": it fragments the integrity of the acting subject, it makes freedom arbitrary and thus an empty abstraction, and it evacuates the world of intrinsic value. The first has been brilliantly elaborated by Pinckaers, who criticizes this interpretation under the name of "freedom of indifference," and shows how it sets the distinct aspects of the human psychology in opposition to each other. According to Pinckaers, the classical Christian notion of the will understood prior determining factors as *intrinsic to* rather than as *intrusions upon* the will's proper activity. Thus, things such as the natural appetite for the good, or the necessity of certain bonds—not only between the will and the good, but also, for example, loyalties to an ideal, a person, a way of life, an institution, or a previous choice<sup>19</sup>—were included as constitutive of the will, and therefore of the freedom that is essential to it. Separating the will's own activity from those other factors that are, so to speak, naturally ingredient in it, entails a fragmentation of both the will and the integrity of soul.

The most fateful rupture entailed in the definition of freedom as the capacity to choose, according to Pinckaers, is the break between the will and reason. If choice is free precisely insofar as it is not determined by something outside of itself, then it finds its freedom only in independence from reason: reason, after all, determines grounds for a choice, and, to that extent, would incline the will one way or another *prior* to its decision: "If freedom consisted in the ability to choose between the *yes* and the *no*, it would have to affirm itself primarily against reason, against the 'reasons' proposed for determining its choice and requiring of it a

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<sup>18</sup>Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970).

<sup>19</sup>Pinckaers, 340.

yes.”<sup>20</sup> But the severance of will from an intrinsic relationship to reason has implications for both faculties: will becomes irrational or “arbitrary” in the modern sense, i.e., freedom becomes in itself something wholly indeterminate; and reason, on the other hand, becomes rationalistic or mechanistic, i.e., something which bears no intrinsic relation to freedom. Pinckaers concludes his analysis with a striking list of the various dichotomies that follow of necessity from the notion of freedom as pure self-determination: either freedom or law, either freedom or reason, either freedom or nature, either freedom or grace, either man was free or God, either subject or object, either freedom or sensibility, either my freedom or the freedom of others, either the individual or society.<sup>21</sup>

One of the immediate implications of the divorce between the will and reason is that choice becomes “arbitrary” by its very essence. What would give a particular choice weight is a determinate reason or natural inclination, something distinct from the simple power to choose and which bears on the will from outside of itself. If the will, by its nature, stands altogether outside the various possibilities that reason proposes or the movements that nature initiates, like a perfectly indifferent spectator unmoved by what it observes until it decides to move itself, its selection of any one of the possibilities will be itself purely unmotivated. The act of choosing will be a spontaneous irruption, a sheer volitional “positing,” inaccessible to the mind—both that of an outside observer and that of the agent him or herself—because it is altogether without reason. But in this case, freedom is an empty notion. Lacking any determination, it lacks all content.

In one of the essays from *The Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch attacks just such an “inflated and yet empty concept of the will,”<sup>22</sup> and we ought to notice that it is inflated for precisely the same reason that it is empty. If freedom is not determined by anything outside of itself, then there is nothing to which it can be subordinated. But there is equally in this case nothing that would give it an intrinsic quality or character. Freedom as choice means freedom as an isolated abstraction, a ghost cut off from all that would fill it out

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 350–51.

<sup>22</sup>Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 76.

and make it concrete. Echoing from a different perspective what we saw in Pinckaers, Murdoch shows what this notion of freedom entails for our conception of the person:

Reason and rule represent a sort of impersonal tyranny in relation to which however the personal will represents perfect freedom. The machinery is relentless, but until the moment of choice the agent is outside the machinery. Morality resides at the point of action. What I am ‘objectively’ is not under my control; logic and observers decide that. What I am ‘subjectively’ is a foot-loose, solitary, substanceless will. Personality dwindles to a point of pure will.<sup>23</sup>

If freedom consists simply in the power to choose, it can bear no positive account of its essential character without losing precisely to that extent its freedom. “If the will is to be totally free,” Murdoch explains—taking “free” here to mean “not determined by an other”—“the world it moves in must be devoid of normative characteristics, so that morality can reside entirely in the pointer of pure choice.”<sup>24</sup> Viewing the will as pure power of choosing leads to what Murdoch calls “a fictitious sense of freedom: I may as well toss a coin.”<sup>25</sup>

But it is not only the will that becomes empty under this notion; the world, too, loses any substance of its own in relation to this personality “dwindled to a point of pure will.” The way the world manifests itself to us is in a profound sense mediated by our concept of the will. As the scholastics used to say, that which is received is received in the mode of the recipient. If the will is in some respect the locus of our relation to the world as persons, then the nature of the will will bring itself to bear on that relation, and therefore on the term of that relation. The question is, then, How does the objective correlate of the will, understood as pure self-determination, appear? If self-determination strictly excludes any determination by an other, then the object of the will, that which stands outside of the will, can have no bearing whatsoever on the will. It can make no claim on the will that is not automatically trumped at the will’s discretion, and so presents itself to the will only

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 16.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 42

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 91.

as a function of the will's choice. In other words, that which stands before the pure power of self-determination, insofar as that power cannot be intrinsically determined by anything outside of itself, can only be a function of that power. It cannot be good; it can only be "optional." Seen from within the horizon established by freedom as the power to choose, the world in general is reduced to a series of options, none of which can be any more compelling than any other for the simple reason that none can be compelling at all.

Let us consider more carefully why something that is purely optional cannot, strictly speaking, be intrinsically good. The distinction between *uti* and *frui*, which Augustine draws in the well-known passages at the beginning of *De Doctrina Christiana*<sup>26</sup> calls our attention to what specifically characterizes goodness in its most proper sense: to say that something is a good is to say that it is an *end*, that wherein the will's activity come to rest. For Augustine, we *enjoy* a good precisely because it presents itself as an end: "to enjoy something is to cling to it with love for its own sake."<sup>27</sup> By contrast, those things which we will other than in the mode of enjoyment—i.e., all relative or instrumental goods (*uti*)—are willed ultimately for the sake of those things willed for themselves alone. Recalling this same point in *De Trinitate*, Augustine states: "For we enjoy things known, in which things themselves the will finds delight for their own sake, and so reposes; but we use those things, which we refer to some other thing which we are to enjoy."<sup>28</sup> But if this is the case, then unless there exists some good that is good in an absolute sense, i.e., good in itself, as an ultimate end, there can be no goods even in a relative sense. Without some ultimate end, the will has no place to come to rest.

Now, as Aristotle says, an end is not something that comes simply at the end of an activity, but in fact also precedes the activity insofar as the activity is initiated for the sake of its end.<sup>29</sup> An end that came only at the end would be an accident rather than a *telos*. In this respect, the end, to be an end, must be prior to the activity that

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<sup>26</sup>Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* [= *De doct.*], book I, 3 [*On Christian Doctrine*, translated by D.W. Robertson, Jr. (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 9].

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, I, 4 [9].

<sup>28</sup>Augustine, *De trinitate* [= *De trin.*], X, 10, 13.

<sup>29</sup>See Aristotle, *Physics*, II, 8, 199a10, and *Parts of Animals*, 639b15.

brings it about, and its capacity to determine that activity is in fact dependent on this priority. For something to be good, that is, for something to be an *end*, it must, so to speak, determine the act that achieves it before that act determines the end. In this respect, a will cannot will a good except insofar as it is determined by that good prior to its act. But if we define the will precisely as the power of self-determination, i.e., in the sense that excludes determination by an other, then the will can in fact will nothing good. We might say that, precisely to the extent that it is exclusively self-determining, the will *usurps* all priority from its object, and therefore undermines the possibility of its relating to that object as to a good.

Those who would defend a view of freedom as self-determination might object that this view does not exclude determination by an other in every respect, but simply from the act of choosing: “I *freely choose* what I take to be good, but then I allow myself to be determined by the good I have chosen.” The question is to what extent this “allowing oneself” continues to be a free act of the will. Insofar as it does, and will is understood to be pure self-determination, it continues to usurp the good character of the “good.” Insofar as it does not, then the will, as pure self-determination, is no longer essentially involved in the adherence to the good. But if the will is not involved, then on this view neither is the person, because as we saw above a notion of will as pure self-determination necessarily entails the identification of the person with this will. In short, then, the will so-conceived cannot will a good, even one that it has chosen: either the will remains, and the good-character of the good is eliminated, or the good remains, and the freedom of the will is eliminated.

But it is not altogether correct to say that the will, understood in this sense, cannot will a good as good. In reality, it is impossible for an act of will, as act, to be without an end. The *de facto* good is whatever determines the act, and if the will is essentially self-determining, then the end of the will in its operation is the will itself. The will, as power to choose, necessarily makes itself ultimate in each of its choices. Such a will can have no true end outside of itself; each of its choices becomes instrumental relative to this end. But relative goods derive their goodness from the end to which they are relative. On the one hand, this therefore means, as Murdoch shows, that the will itself becomes the source of all goodness: “The centre of this type of post-Kantian moral philosophy is the notion of the will as the creator of value. Values which were previously in

some sense inscribed in the heavens and guaranteed by God collapse into the human will. There is no transcendent reality. The idea of the good remains indefinable and empty so that human choice may fill it.”<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, however, because the will lacks all intrinsic determination, it possesses in fact no goodness with which to fill the idea of the good. In its sheer power, it is impotent to do anything but reflect its emptiness into the world. Its intrinsic emptiness is, as it were, logically contagious. Making all values contingent upon choice does not magnify the power of the human ego, as it might seem to at first glance, but dissolves the substance of both world and ego into the empty abstraction of freedom. It would be illuminating, here, to compare the transformation of the objects of choice from goods into options within the abstract self-relation of freedom to Marx’s analysis of the transformation of commodities into abstract exchange-values within the essentially unlimited circulation of capital: “instead of simply representing relations of commodities, it enters now, so to say, into private relations with itself.”<sup>31</sup>

The final result of identifying freedom with the power to choose is nihilism, as Nietzsche describes it in *The Will to Power*: “What does nihilism mean? *That the highest values devalue themselves.* The aim is lacking; ‘why?’ finds no answer.”<sup>32</sup> A genuine aim requires a genuine end, something that offers a response to the question ‘why?’ But a genuine end, as we have seen, must in some respect move me prior to my choosing of it. Goodness or value presents itself phenomenologically as attraction, and attraction is the action upon me of an external object, the intimate “tugging” on me of something other than myself. But such attraction loses any force to the extent that I identify myself with my will as the power to choose. If there is no possibility of profound attraction, then even if there did exist things in the world things of genuine value, they could never be perceived as such, because to be experienced as good would require intruding upon and supplanting the end that the will makes of itself. If to be merely an “option” means that a thing makes

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 80.

<sup>31</sup>Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 335.

<sup>32</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 9.

no claim whatsoever on the will before the will makes a claim on it, then, from what we have just seen, one way to characterize nihilism would be to say that the world appears as nothing but a set of options; and defining the will as the power to choose allows the world to appear in no other way.

In reaction to the problems we have been exploring, we may be inclined to think that the only alternative is to eliminate the notion of choice or self-determination from our understanding of the will, and thus that we can keep from drowning in nihilism only by clinging to the planks of some form of determinism. Either, it would seem, we insist on freedom at the risk of nihilism, or we insist that there are things that must be imposed on the will from without, things concerning which the will is simply not free. But neither of these alternatives adequately expresses Augustine's view. When Augustine elaborated the will's apparently sovereign power of choice in his relatively early work, *De Libero Arbitrio*, he did so explicitly within the context of an affirmation of the will's being ordered by its nature to the supreme Good, God. Moreover, while he laid increasing emphasis on the will's being determined from outside of itself in his later writings and especially in debate with the Pelagians, he never surrendered his insistence on the will's free power to choose.<sup>33</sup> *Prima facie*, these two affirmations seem to stand in great tension, if not outright contradiction. If Augustine did not see them as mutually exclusive, it can only be because he was operating with a notion of freedom significantly different from the one we tend to presume.

## 2. Freedom, love, and goodness

There can be no question in the present context of elaborating a full account of Augustine's notion of freedom, or tracing the different shades of emphasis as the notion evolved within the different contexts of his writing. We will, instead, engage his thought specifically for light on the question: in what respect and to what extent is the will determined from within, i.e., by itself, and to what extent is the will determined from without, i.e., by an other,

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<sup>33</sup>See Jose Antonio Galindo, "La libertad como autodeterminación en san Agustín," *Augustinus* 35 (1990): 299-320, here: 300-01. In evidence of this point, Mary Clark cites numerous passages from Augustine's later writings: see 98-101.

in its normal operation. Exploring the structure of the will's operation will in turn open up insight into the meaning of freedom.

The first essential characteristic of the will worth recalling here is what we might call its "transparency": the will, for Augustine, is essentially *intentional*, i.e., not so much a thing closed in on itself, as a relation to what is other than itself. In *De duabus animabus*, Augustine defines the will as a "movement of the soul" (*animi motus*),<sup>34</sup> and he specifies the possible types of movement in the *City of God*: the will is either the soul's movement to acquire a good, to preserve a good that has been acquired, to avoid an evil, or to reject an evil that is being suffered.<sup>35</sup> Now, as we can see, what characterizes the movement in each case is a good under a particular modality, either as good *per se* or as the negation of an evil. James Wetzel is therefore correct to affirm that "[w]henver we act, Augustine would contend, we act under some representation of the good,"<sup>36</sup> an affirmation that can be denied only by denying either that the will is a movement or that a movement has some destination. But to say that the will acts under a representation of the good means that its own movement begins, not first in itself, but in the good that it represents to itself. In this, Augustine's view accords with that of Aristotle, for whom "the first mover of [our action] is the object of desire."<sup>37</sup> In other words, if the act of will is a motion, that motion is generated at least in part by something other than the will, namely, by its object. Augustine's comparison of the will's natural movement to a stone's weight (*pondus*) illustrates this point beautifully: we tend to think of weight as an intrinsic property of a body, while in fact this property is unintelligible merely in itself, but can be understood only as the attraction or pull of another body.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, however self-moving the will appears to be, its motion is likewise explicable only by reference to some attraction.

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<sup>34</sup>Augustine, *De Duabus Animabus*, X, 14.

<sup>35</sup>Augustine, *De civitate dei* [= *De civ.*], XIV, 6 [translated by Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 556. All citations from *De civ.* will be from this translation].

<sup>36</sup>Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue*, 8.

<sup>37</sup>Aristotle, *De Anima*, III, 10, 433b12.

<sup>38</sup>*De lib.*, III, 1 [72]: "This movement of the will [i.e., its natural movement] is similar to the downward movement of a stone in that it belongs to the will just as that downward movement belongs to the stone."

It is not an accident that Augustine uses the image of the “weight” to reveal the nature not only of the will, but also of love.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Augustine goes so far as to *identify* the will with love,<sup>40</sup> and he can do so because, as Gilson shows, he understands love, like the will, as “by definition, a natural tendency toward a certain good.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, love is not just one of the various possible activities of the will, as we might think insofar as we take the will to be an indifferent power of choice, but it brings to light the very essence of the will. Now, viewing the will as love immediately expands our conception of its operation. Love is not the abstract activity of “sheer willing,” but in fact involves all of the human faculties required to perceive, be moved by, pursue, attain, enjoy, and adhere to goodness: namely, the senses, the will, the passions, and the intelligence. In this respect, whatever enables the will to achieve its own acts enters *intrinsically* into its operation rather than intruding upon it from the outside. While the will preserves its own activity, that activity is always mediated by the other faculties, even as it gathers these up and directs them. As Gilson puts it,

The action of the will upon the human being as a whole is accomplished through the mediation of the images and ideas that it uses. In Augustine’s psychology, the will is not the ‘originator’ of the representations, but it is the power that ‘couples’ with them. In other words, it is the will that either applies our faculties of sensation, imagination, and thought to their own acts, or turns these faculties away from them; hence the dominant influence that the will exercises by taking up all of the human being’s activities into the direction of its dominant love.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>See *Conf.*, XIII, 9, 10 [278]; cf., *De civ.*, XI, 28 [463].

<sup>40</sup>*De civ.*, XIV, 7 [557]: “And so a rightly directed will is love in a good sense and a perverted will is love in a bad sense. Therefore a love which strains after the possession of the loved object is desire; and the love which possesses and enjoys that object is joy.”

<sup>41</sup>Étienne Gilson, *Introduction à l’étude de Saint Augustin* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1949), 175. On the connection between love and the will in Augustine, see *ibid.*, 170-77, and Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 2: *Willing*, 102-04.

<sup>42</sup>Gilson, *Introduction à l’étude de Saint Augustin*, 174, fn. 2.

In the same vein, Arendt explains that Augustine calls the will “love” because both are essentially a “coupling, binding agent.”<sup>43</sup> Understood as love, she continues, the will operates not as a separate faculty in itself, but “in its function within the mind as a whole, where all single faculties—memory, intellect, and will—are ‘mutually referred to each other’.”<sup>44</sup> In short, seeing the will as love leads us to consider it not as an autonomous power, but as a distinct faculty through which the whole human being operates: the will, in this case, is as receptive as it is spontaneous, acting in response to and in conjunction with the activities of the other faculties, because it acts in response to a perceived good.

Before facing the obvious objections to viewing the will as essentially a love for the good, it is worthwhile to take note of the path it opens through the dichotomies entailed by the problematic view of freedom sketched at the outset. As we saw there, to the extent that freedom means exclusive self-determination, I can be truly free only in a world devoid of intrinsic value, wherein nothing makes any particular claim on me, so that the act of choosing finally reduces to an explosion of random spontaneity. Since the world does, in fact, contain determinate goods, my freedom would in this case come to expression *only* in my rejection of these goods. By contrast, if we acknowledge that the will is essentially love, such that it fulfills itself *as* will, and comes to its proper flourishing, in the attainment of what is good, then being determined by an external object, i.e., the good, represents no compromise of freedom but in fact one of its crucial preconditions.

We tend to assume that freedom is opposed to necessity of any sort. If the will is viewed as love, however, it is not opposed to all forms of necessity, but only a particular form, namely, coercion. What is the difference between coercion and the sort of necessity that would be harmonious with freedom? In the former, the will is forced in an extrinsic sense to move in a direction contrary to itself. However, as Augustine repeatedly observes, it is possible for the will to be compelled by something other than itself, but in a “non-coercive” way. If the will is compelled by something that is genuinely good, it has the capacity actively to appropriate that external determination to itself, so that it is in this case compelled as

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<sup>43</sup>Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 2: *Willing*, 102.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 104.

much by itself, by its own inner nature, as it is by the good.<sup>45</sup> Augustine calls this active, inward appropriation *delight* or *enjoyment* (*delectatio*). Such delight is, indeed, a form of necessity—as he puts it, “we necessarily act according to that which most delights us”<sup>46</sup>—but it is a form distinct from coercion insofar as it does not run contrary to the will’s own willing: “What is more absurd,” asks Augustine, “than to say that someone unwillingly wills the good?”<sup>47</sup> It is, then, precisely delight that marks the difference between being slavishly determined by another and being freely determined by an other.<sup>48</sup> But if it is the case that delight is a free necessity, then we already begin to see how freedom could increase rather than decrease in the presence of things that delight, i.e., things of intrinsic value: the greater the presence of the good, the stronger the love for it; the stronger the love, the stronger and more complete the will, and therefore, the fuller the freedom.

But more can be said on this score. To insist on the *self-*determining character of the will tends to presuppose an opposition between freedom and dependence. This opposition, however, turns out to be an illusion. The reason one offers for rejecting the claim an intrinsic good makes upon us is that the dependence on this good seems to imply a curtailment of our self-dependence, or freedom. But if it is the case that the will, insofar as it is motivated at all, always acts under the representation of some good, the will cannot in fact escape from some external determination. What this implies, then, is that the dichotomy between freedom and dependence is a false one. Indeed, because every act of the will is determined in some respect by something outside of itself, having a human will necessarily means being, at every moment, in a state of dependence. To will is always to bind ourselves: the real question is therefore not whether we

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<sup>45</sup>Galindo expresses a similar point through the paradox that a free act that is ordered to the good is “*necessary* with respect to the *act*, but *free* with respect to the internal *mode* in which this act is carried out” (see, for example, 307). But Galindo seems to overlook the real paradox of Augustine’s idea insofar as he articulates the act by *separating* what is free from what is necessary, claiming, in the end, that “[a]n internally necessary desire of the free will is a contradiction” (311). Augustine, by contrast, insists that the desire is *both* necessary and free.

<sup>46</sup>Augustine, *Expositio Epistolae ad Galatas*, 49.

<sup>47</sup>Augustine, *Contra Iulianum opus imperfectum*, 101.

<sup>48</sup>See John Burnaby, *Amor Dei: A Study of the Religion of St. Augustine* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1947), 232–34.

choose to be free or to be dependent, but rather whether we choose to bind ourselves to what enslaves or to what liberates.

Augustine's view on this point is unequivocally clear, and remained essentially the same from the beginning of his writings to the end. It is possible to lay out his view in five simple points. 1) As human beings, we cannot live without willing, and therefore loving: "What is this? Are you supposed to stop loving? Impossible! Motionless, dead, abominable, miserable: that is what you would be if you loved nothing."<sup>49</sup> 2) It is impossible to will without seeking happiness: "[D]o you think that there is anyone who does not in every way will and desire a happy life?"<sup>50</sup> 3) We can not, therefore, will without binding ourselves to something outside of ourselves: "Whether he will or no, a man is necessarily a slave to the things by means of which he seeks to be happy."<sup>51</sup> 4) To the extent that we bind ourselves to what is "lower" than us—i.e., purely material things—we compromise our freedom, thus pledging ourselves to a "voluntary abandonment of highest being, and toil among inferior beings which is not voluntary."<sup>52</sup> As an illustration of this insight, we might think of the richly suggestive figure of Caliban in *The Tempest*, a living embodiment of the rudimentary passions, who, though confessing abject servitude to his captors, in fact leads them at will by the nose. 5) We come into possession of freedom, by contrast, by binding ourselves to what is truly good in itself: "This is our freedom, when we are subject to the truth," which is "not merely one good among others; it is the highest good, the good that makes us happy."<sup>53</sup>

Once we acknowledge that freedom does not exclude dependence, but rather presupposes a dependence of a particular sort, it is no longer possible to identify freedom simply with the power to choose. Indeed, this power becomes relativized, in a manner we have to discuss, insofar as freedom, in Augustine's view, implies the sort of attachment that excludes certain choices. Thus, in

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<sup>49</sup>Augustine, *De bono viduitatis*, XXI, 26, quoted in Gilson, *Introduction à l'étude de Saint Augustin*, 175.

<sup>50</sup>*De lib.*, I, 14 [23].

<sup>51</sup>Augustine, *De vera religione* [= *De ver.*], xxxviii, 69 [*Of True Religion*, translated by J.H.S. Burleigh (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1964), 66. All citations of *De ver.* will be from this translation].

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, xl, 76 [74].

<sup>53</sup>*De lib.*, II, 13 [57], 15 [59].

describing freedom in its most perfect sense—eschatological freedom—Augustine claims that those in heaven, having lost the capacity to sin, i.e., to make certain choices, are not only happier, but are specifically *freer*: “Now the fact that they will be unable to delight in sin does not entail that they will have no free will. In fact, the will will be the freer in that it is freed from delight in sin and immovably fixed in a delight in not sinning.”<sup>54</sup> The difference between Augustine’s view and the conventional modern one rings out particularly clearly in his description of the state of freedom as being “immovably fixed.” We can make no sense of this passage if we identify freedom, in a negative sense, with “having options open.” Instead, we must begin to consider a more positive conception of freedom—for example, as the “power to abide in the good,” which Augustine describes at the end of *De Vera Religione*.<sup>55</sup> But how to understand this more positive view, and what role it preserves for choice, will have to be unfolded, which we can do by considering some objections.

Specifically, two often-cited and related difficulties spring up immediately from this analysis. On the one hand, if the will is ordered to the good in such a way that it is inwardly strengthened precisely to the extent that it is determined from without, then have we simply eliminated any room at all for something like “self-determination” in the functioning of the will? What would be the difference, in this case, between a human being with a will naturally ordered to the good, and a creature that reacted passively and automatically to the presence of the good, its acts being exhaustively a function of whatever natural inclination or reason dominated at any given moment? Aware of this difficulty, there are some commentators who point to Augustine’s earlier work on free choice as an insight into freedom that he compromised, if not altogether abandoned, in his debate with the Pelagians in which he laid so much emphasis on the supreme determining power of the external

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<sup>54</sup>*De civ.*, XXII, 30 [1088-89].

<sup>55</sup>*De ver.*, liv, 113 [107]. Articulating this positive sense of freedom is one of the primary aims of Mary Clark’s book, *Augustine: Philosopher of Freedom*. Susan Wolff has more recently offered a strong defense of a positive view of freedom, as intrinsically bound to the True and the Good, in her acclaimed book *Freedom Within Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). She does so, not in reference to Augustine, but on its own terms.

order of grace.<sup>56</sup> But Augustine himself was aware of this objection, and yet it never shook his conviction about the will's natural ordination to the good. On the other hand, if the will is naturally ordered to the good, how can we explain the possibility of what is evidently an actuality, namely, that the will can choose things that are not good, and even, strangely, things it *knows* are not good? Augustine himself accounts for the existence of evil in a world brought into being by a perfectly good Creator through an appeal to the existence of free will.<sup>57</sup> Doesn't this imply an understanding of will, not as love of the good, but as essentially the capacity to choose, which is precisely the understanding that proved problematic in our earlier analysis? How—to put the question again—can we reconcile this view of the will with its being naturally ordered to the good?

### 3. Consent as co-act

We will need to find an answer to the first difficulty in order to be able to respond fruitfully to the second. If it is the case that this first difficulty stems, once again, from the apparent dilemma—*either* will as pure self-determination, *or* will as pure determination by another—we can resolve it if we can find some way to reject the opposition it implies. Augustine overcomes a version of this dilemma in his working out of the encounter of grace and human freedom in the debate with the Pelagians, and the essence of his response turns on the notion of *consent* (*con-sentire*, to “perceive with an other”), an act that so to speak weaves together the work of two agents into one: “To consent to the calling of God or to refuse it belongs to our own will: which, so far from conflicting with the text *What hast thou which thou hast not received?*, does even confirm it. For the soul cannot receive and possess the gift there spoken of but by consenting. *What* the soul is to possess, *what* it is to receive, pertains to God: the receiving and possessing, necessarily to him who receives and

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<sup>56</sup>See, for example, Wetzel's discussion of Gerard O'Daly and John Rist, whom he charges with being unable to “imagine that being determined to respond to the good was a form of freedom, irreducible to either liberty of indifference or freedom from constraint” (221).

<sup>57</sup>See, e.g., *De ver.*, xiv, 27 [24–25].

possesses.”<sup>58</sup> As this passage affirms, consent is something that one *gives*, i.e., it is therefore an act that originates from the consentor, and yet the very same act is somehow *received* from God, and therefore originates from a source beyond the consentor. As Wetzel concisely puts it, “consent is a gift.”<sup>59</sup> By appealing to this notion, Augustine intends, in other words, to describe an act that is wholly due to God, and yet in such a way that human agency is not short-circuited. Cardinal Bellarmine characterizes the operation of grace as an act for which both God and man are wholly responsible: “there is nothing of ours that is not God’s, nor anything of God’s that is not ours. God does the *whole* and man does the *whole*.”<sup>60</sup>

I propose that the notion of consent that Augustine here introduces opens up a way to overcome the dilemma at the heart of the problem of freedom, not only in relation to the divine activity of grace, but analogously in relation to the activity of the good upon the will in its normal operation.<sup>61</sup> If the will always operates under the representation of some good, we may say that each of its acts is, not the *ex nihilo* creation of values, but always an act of consent to something that precedes it. In this case, as we shall see, we avoid determinism insofar as we affirm the spontaneous agency of the will, but we also avoid nihilism insofar as we understand that agency precisely as the “letting be” of the good’s own activity. In this way, the notion of consent allows a complex view of the will’s activity, which will prove fruitful for our understanding of freedom. Let us therefore consider in more detail the structure of the act of consent.

The first thing we can say about the act of consent is that it is in every case a *response*. I can consent only *to* something, and that “something” must be present to elicit my act, and therefore precede it. There is, thus, no such thing as a purely spontaneous act of consent. Furthermore, the content of the act of consent is given by

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<sup>58</sup>Augustine, *De Spiritu et littera*, 60.

<sup>59</sup>Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue*, 166.

<sup>60</sup>Cardinal Bellarmine, *De Justificatione*, v. 5, cited in Burnaby, 239.

<sup>61</sup>Ultimately, the analogy depends on the theological context—the relations of the persons of the Trinity, Mary’s consent, and the relation of the two natures of Christ in the one person—which becomes increasingly evident the further one enters into the problematic. On the importance of the theological horizon for Augustine’s treatment of philosophical issues, see, for example, Michael Hanby, *Augustine and the Modern World* (London: Routledge, 2003), 72–105.

the object of that act rather than by the consenting subject. Consent doesn't invent; it receives. Receptivity constitutes the very essence of the act. At the same time, however, this sort of receptivity is active rather than passive. A dead will can be manipulated, but it cannot give its consent. For that, a kind of spontaneity is required, in order that the determinate content presented not be imposed from without but instead actively embraced from within. There is consent, then, only where there is genuinely free and spontaneous agency, even if—or, better: precisely *because*—the character of this agency is receptive.

Now, the suggestion that consent should be essential to any act we would recognize as free does not seem like a revelation: we hear it affirmed quite regularly in normal political discourse. The real bite of the notion makes itself felt only when we are careful to distinguish Augustine's notion from the conventional one. We are accustomed to think of consent in terms of the notion of free choice we discussed at the outset: whenever something is presented to me, I am free to decide whether to accept or reject it, which means that my will stands in a state of indifference or "neutrality" before the present good, and whether I consent or not depends wholly upon my choice, my power of self-determination. As powerful as the attraction of the good might be, as compelling as the reason to choose it might be, it is my will that ultimately stamps it with a 'yea' or 'nay,' and my will may be informed by motives, but it is in no way controlled by them. If I thus claim to be free, it is because I affirm that there remains in me a faculty independent of both my desires and my intellect, and that it is to this faculty that the final word in my activities is reserved.<sup>62</sup>

But such a view returns us to our earlier difficulties: it implies that the movement of the will is from first to last self-originated, and it thus becomes once again a purely arbitrary, and therefore empty, act. To avoid these difficulties, however, we do not have to eliminate a moment of consent or choice from the will's

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<sup>62</sup>Charles Kahn identifies consent as the locus of freedom in Aquinas's psychology (see "Discovering the Will: From Aristotle to Augustine," in *The Question of Eclecticism: Studies in Later Greek Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 247), but does not sufficiently differentiate it from the Stoic notion of assent, which exhibits the same problems as the conventional notion we have been elaborating. For a fuller treatment of the difficulties of the Stoic view, see Hanby, 93-105.

relation to the good. Instead, we need only deny that this moment is a separate and “self-enclosed” act, possessing its own logic, which is defined by the autonomous agent as its sole source. In Augustine’s view, consent is not something the will does alone, but is essentially a “co-act,” that is, a single act that is constituted by two irreducibly distinct “agencies,” namely, the good’s activity of determination and the will’s spontaneous act of allowing itself to be determined. While these activities are different from one another, they are nevertheless inseparable—indeed, they are in some respect identical within the single act of “letting be.” It is impossible, within this single act, to determine precisely where one agency ends and the other begins, and it is likewise impossible to say that the two agencies ever lose their difference from one another.<sup>63</sup>

As paradoxical as such a “co-act” may at first appear, examples are not difficult to find. Let us consider the act of teaching. Teaching is never simply an acting *on* a passive student from the outside (as teachers experience, with frustration, every day), but is by its very essence a “co-acting”: the student is not taught, does not learn, except through active participation, through the intense and demanding activity of attending to what is being said and receiving it. This activity is not a self-enclosed activity that is secondarily added to the first activity of teaching, but is rather the inward reception of an external determination. Not being added from without, this reception is in fact an *integral part* of the giving, such that the teaching could not be said to occur without it. Thus, there is no teaching without learning. But the contrary is even more obviously true: there is no learning without teaching. Indeed, even if teaching is dependent on the active reception of the learner, it has a certain priority over this activity, since it is what initiates the learning. Thus, there is 1) a mutual dependence between the two activities, which is 2) nevertheless *asymmetrical*, since the teaching gives rise to the capacity to learn, which in turn allows the capacity to teach, even if 3) this asymmetry does not in any way imply chronological succession: clearly, learning cannot come chronologically *after* teaching because the act of teaching includes this responsive act within its own act. Indeed, it is possible to say that the act is something the student is *wholly* responsible for, just as it is possible to say the responsibility rests entirely with the teacher. Here we have

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<sup>63</sup>Hanby, 82.

two distinct agencies dependent upon one another for the occurrence of a single event.

That there exists an analogy between the act of consent/being-determined and the act of learning/teaching should be evident. The various dilemmas we have encountered up to this point have all cropped up because of an assumption that the activity of the will to determine itself and the determining activity of the will's object, the good, have to be two separate activities if they are to be distinct at all, and that we can subsequently overcome the problems of their separation only by reductively absorbing one into the other. Taking our cue from Augustine's notion of consent as a single act constituted by two distinct activities, however, we can propose an alternative: the act of the will is nothing other than the actualization of the good, a participation in its determining activity. It is, so to speak, a spontaneous "letting be" of the determination of the good, which is not a separate activity added on to the good's determination, but is nevertheless a distinct element in that good's actual determining of the will and thus its own completion as goodness. If this is the case, it becomes impossible to think of the will as a sovereign power of choice standing as a self-enclosed indifference over and above the good of its objects. Insofar as the power of the will lies in its consent, which is always an act *shared* by the will and some good, then, on its own, the will is impotent. It is the very essence of the will to be involved in the good's presentation of itself as good, such that it fulfills itself in *allowing* the good to determine it.

There are three things to note in this mutual play between the will and the good. First of all, according to this view, "will power" is a gift; the will's own impetus arises, not first from the will itself, but from the good to which the will consents: "For the strength of our will to anything is proportionate to the certainty of our knowledge of its goodness, and the ardor of our delight in it."<sup>64</sup> Second, for Augustine, as we have already observed, when the will enjoys or takes delight in an object that is other than itself, it is not "coerced" by, but inwardly appropriates, the object's extrinsic determination. In other words, the will receives its own power from the good insofar as it, through its own most intimate inward movement, joins the extrinsically determining act of the good—not

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<sup>64</sup>Augustine, *De peccatorum meritis et remissione*, II, 26.

as one thing added to another, but as an intrinsic part of a single whole—and thus makes this act its own. Third, it is a discrete act of consent that effects this appropriation. We can, and indeed *must*, speak of free choice in this context, insofar as the joining of the will and the good would not occur without a real spontaneity on the part of the will, a spontaneity that can, in principle, be lacking as we shall see. But it would miss the point to think of the will as the indifferent capacity to choose between alternatives. Rather, it would in this case best be understood as original and active participation in goodness. In this sense, the will would receive its meaning always in relation to some good, even while not being thereby forced to surrender its own spontaneous agency. The spontaneous agency it retains, however, is never simply a random “happening,” but is always initiated by the provocative presence of some good.

We return, then, to the passage from Augustine cited above: there is nothing our will possesses that it has not received—i.e., the will’s own act “begins,” as it were, in the goodness of its object and in this sense the movement of the will belongs to the object; and yet the will does not receive this act except through its own spontaneous act of consent—i.e., the movement of the will cannot be simply reduced to the attraction of the good.

#### 4. Freedom as original participation in goodness

If consent represents the essential act of the will, then freedom is best viewed as original participation in goodness. To see what we have gained by this conception, we may consider how it serves to recover those things we typically associate with freedom—namely, choice, the possibility of evil, self-determination, surprise or spontaneity, and even a kind of autonomy—but within a conception that avoids their potential problems because it radically transforms their meaning.

1. While it is true that Augustine does not identify freedom with the capacity to choose, his view does not diminish but in fact amplifies its importance. For Plotinus, the will (*βούλησις*) contributes nothing to the mind’s apprehension of the good;<sup>65</sup> for Augustine, by contrast, the soul’s relation to the good is deficient

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<sup>65</sup>Plotinus, *Ennead* VI, 8, 6.

without the will's choosing of it. But this choice is not a power that the will "lords over" the good in its freedom. Quite to the contrary, it is a demand that the good imposes on the will. We are called upon to choose the good, and invest ourselves in our choice, precisely *in order to be free*. The importance of this choice in Augustine's view of freedom, and its contrast to the conventional notion, perhaps come to light best in the drama that forms the climax of the *Confessions*, book VIII: Augustine experiences a lack of freedom, not because his options are too limited, but in a sense because they are not sufficiently limited. There is a residual disorder in his soul, by virtue of which he finds himself incapable of being fully attracted to what he knows is fully good. He cannot, as it were, will what he wills, or in other words: he cannot give full, single-hearted consent: "The one necessary condition, which meant not only going but at once arriving there, was to have the will to go—provided only that the will was strong and unqualified, not the turning and twisting first this way, then that, of a will half-wounded, struggling with one part rising up and the other part falling down."<sup>66</sup> His capacity to choose, in this case, is indeed his freedom, but that capacity is the ability to consent with the whole of his being to the good that demands to lay hold of him. Without his consent, the good is merely good in itself, and not good for him, i.e., it does not in fact claim him.<sup>67</sup> And yet it is nothing but the claim that the good makes on him that enables his choice. Freedom of choice is here coincident with the compelling nature of the good. The freedom that we would possess, in short, *demands* that we choose, and it is the good itself that gives us the power to make the choice.

2. Moreover, viewing the determining action of the good as a "co-act" shared by the will and the good allows us to accommodate the possibility of sin without surrendering the will's natural ordering to the good. Without entering into all of the complexities of the debate surrounding this question,<sup>68</sup> we have at least the

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<sup>66</sup>*Conf.*, VIII, viii, 19 [147].

<sup>67</sup>On this point, see Clark, 139.

<sup>68</sup>On the various issues implied in an ontological conception of evil in comparison to the more modern, "voluntaristic" conception, see Herbert Rommel, *Zum Begriff des Bösen bei Augustinus und Kant* (Frankfurt am Main: Pater Lang GmbH, 1997).

principle of a coherent interpretation of Augustine's view. It is well-known that Augustine appeals to evil as proof of the existence of free will; but in *The City of God*, he affirms that it is also evidence of the will's being ordered to the good, since, otherwise, evil would not be bad: "That is why the *choice* of evil is an impressive proof that the *nature* is good."<sup>69</sup> Those who believe they can explain the possibility of sin simply by saying that the will is "free," i.e., capable of choosing between indifferent alternatives, are therefore mistaken. They do not solve, but in fact exacerbate the problem: if goodness is not an inherent quality of nature, then evil loses its meaning; if nature is good, the will is separate from the good in all of its acts precisely to the extent that it is "independent" of nature. The problem, in this case, becomes not to explain how sin is possible, but how anything *other* than sin is possible.

On the other hand, those who insist on the will's natural ordering to the good are at a loss to explain the possibility of sin *only insofar as they reduce the will's activity to the good's determination*. In this case, we would have to find some "objective" cause of evil in nature, and in the end would be unable to avoid implicating God. But if we understand the good's acting upon the will as in every instance a "co-act", and therefore as an act that requires the responsive contribution of the will's own agency, then we have a source of responsibility, which is nevertheless *not* a "reified choice" or the simple addition of a new causality. As Augustine says, an evil will "has no cause."<sup>70</sup> To "explain" it, he introduces the notion of "deficient" causality—i.e., the failure of a positive cause—a term that makes sense only in the context of the co-act of consent. The choice of evil is not, in its essence, a spontaneous act of the will, insofar as such spontaneity occurs only through the co-agency of the good. Instead, the choice of evil is a lack of the spontaneity that receptive adherence to the good requires. At the root of any choice of evil there is thus a half-hearted willing. This is not to say, of course, that such a choice will not be perhaps filled with an intensity that overwhelms the person who makes it; it is just that this intensity, being merely self-propelled, will be the intensity of only "half" of a person rather than the integral "gathering up" of the personality that

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<sup>69</sup>*De civ.*, XI, 17 [448].

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, XII, 6 [478].

genuine consent implies.<sup>71</sup> If the good's determination involves consent, then, we can say that sin is a *result* of freedom without – making it the *expression* of freedom: because the reception of the good requires my contribution, and thus my freedom, I can fail it; but if freedom means active participation in the good, in doing so I am surrendering rather than fulfilling my freedom. Gilson offers a characteristically pithy statement of this insight: “man is free, and by his own choice he does evil, but not by that which makes his choice free.”<sup>72</sup>

3. The view of freedom as original participation in the good also enables us to recover a notion of self-determination in our understanding of the will while avoiding the emptiness necessarily implied in the conventional understanding. There is no act of will that is not determined by some good, and yet that good does not determine the will unless the will shares in the determining activity. In other words, the good does not determine the will unless the will is *also* self-determining. We can recall, here, Augustine's struggle in the *Confessions*: he suffered from an impotence to determine himself precisely because he was unable to receive in a profound way the determining power of the good. Aquinas clarifies what lies implicit in Augustine, by distinguishing between first and second causes: the will causes its own movement without being the *first* cause of this movement.<sup>73</sup> To put it another way, the will determines itself *only within* the comprehensive determination of the good. The problem with the conventional notion is therefore not that it insists on self-determination in its understanding of the will, but that it assumes that self-determination means *not* being determined by another. If *consent* describes the proper activity of the will, by contrast, self-determination will both require being determined by another and it will in turn be required by it. Instead of the opposition between the self and the other that Pinckaers described, then, we get a recasting

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<sup>71</sup>In *Physics*, VII, 1, 241b25–242a16, Aristotle makes a brilliant argument that a self-mover can never move itself as a whole, and that the only way for a thing to move itself as a whole is to be moved by another.

<sup>72</sup>Gilson, *Introduction à l'étude de Saint Augustin*, 318.

<sup>73</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, 83, 1 ad 3: “Free-will is the cause of its own movement, because by his free-will man moves himself to act. But it does not of necessity belong to liberty that what is free should be the first cause of itself, as neither for one thing to be cause of another need it be the first cause.”

of the powerful paradox we saw above: the more *spontaneously* the will involves itself in the determination, the more profoundly it is determined by the good acting upon it. And the converse is also true: the more compellingly the good offers itself to the will, the more free or self-determining the will becomes in its reception. The two activities are not in competition, but instead co-operate the one act of being determined through consent, and so they increase in tandem.<sup>74</sup>

4. If the will does, then, possess a spontaneity and self-causality in its reception of the good, are its choices determined by its reasons for choosing? The best answer is both yes and no. Clearly, there is an ultimate inexplicability in the choice of evil as such, insofar as such choices have no positive cause, and, as Augustine says, “What is not anything, cannot be known.”<sup>75</sup> But it would seem that *good* choices are wholly explicable in terms of the determination of the good chosen. According to Wetzel, if we admit the slightest spontaneity into the will’s operation distinct from the good’s determination, human action becomes opaque as a rule: “The theory of will as the power of choice, informed by but independent of desire, makes every action to some degree unintelligible, for if the theory were true, no action would ever be sufficiently explained by its motives.” It is this insight that leads him to make the radical claim that, for Augustine, “[t]here is no faculty of will, distinct from desire, which we can use to determine our actions.”<sup>76</sup> But Wetzel’s concern here is justified only insofar as we concede the conventional notion of choice as a purely spontaneous, and therefore unmotivated, act. Making this concession in turn forces us to adopt a deterministic understanding of human action in order to preserve its intelligibility.

If we view choice, by contrast, as consent and therefore conceive freedom as original participation in goodness, a third alternative presents itself: all human action becomes, to some degree, a *surprise*, without for all that being utterly arbitrary and without

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<sup>74</sup>In giving an account of the source of faith and meritorious works, Augustine likewise says at the very end of his life: “faith itself is found among God’s gifts, which are given *through the same Spirit*. Both therefore are ours, because of our will’s free choice, and yet both are given, through the Spirit of faith and love” (*Retractiones*, I, 23, cited in Burnaby, 230).

<sup>75</sup>*De lib.*, II, 20 [69].

<sup>76</sup>Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue*, 8.

motivation. Interior to the good's determination is the will's spontaneous consent, which co-enables its actualization. The consent brings the good into being in a particular form, here and now, in a way that cannot be determined beforehand merely on the basis of the good alone. In this respect, there is a certain gratuity or "whylessness," something that transcends explanation, in every act of the will. But this gratuity does not make the act random or irrational, because the entire content of the act is nevertheless determinate, insofar as the act of the will is not the addition of new content, but the letting be of a good.<sup>77</sup> Thus, if the act of choice is understood as a consent in the way described above, it can be wholly motivated without thereby being reduced to the determination of the good that motivates it. In this sense, sufficient reasons can be given for an act that has taken place, but at the same time, we do not have to infer that the action was therefore an automatic result of those reasons, and that it would necessarily occur again or in the same way if the same reasons were present.

Augustine illustrates this unpredictability with a consideration of two identical men facing the same situation, who nonetheless make different choices.<sup>78</sup> He also tells the story of twins who, despite the very same constitution, exhibit different behavior, and he suggests that the only explanation is a difference in the use of the will.<sup>79</sup> Finally, in XII, 21 of the *City of God*, Augustine affirms that human freedom is a genuine novelty (*novitas*) which is not blind chance but is harmonious with the providential ordering of the world. Interpreting this passage, Arendt observes that, while everything else in the world was created in the sense of being given a beginning (*principium*), the human being was created *as* a beginning (*initium*), that is, as a relatively absolute reflection of God's own absoluteness.<sup>80</sup> In short, since freedom is a participation in the

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<sup>77</sup>Burnaby makes the same claim about God's act of creation, which (as Albrecht Dihle has claimed) is the horizon within which Augustine developed his own notion of will. *Creatio ex nihilo* is by definition "unmotivated," and yet at the same time it is not arbitrary precisely because it is *good*: see Burnaby, 165–66.

<sup>78</sup>*De civ.*, XII, 6 [478–79].

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*, V, 2 [181].

<sup>80</sup>Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 2: *Willing*, 109–10. Arendt, however, connects this assertion by Augustine too quickly with Kant's notion of spontaneity. But their views are in fact worlds apart, insofar as Kant would have no room in his

goodness of being, there is something of the gratuity or “whylessness” of creation at the heart of every act of the will.

5. The final, and perhaps most surprising, implication of this view of freedom that we will mention is that it allows us to say that there is a certain sense in which freedom of the will *can* in fact be understood as autonomous, or independent of external determination. It is surprising because this was the sense of freedom we ruled out at the beginning as incoherent. But we did so, then, in the light of a view of the will as independent of the good. If the will is separate from the good, its being undetermined by what is other than itself would necessarily imply the nihilism we spoke of above. If, by contrast, freedom is understood precisely as original participation in the good, then it shares in the character of the good in which it participates. As we have seen, according to Augustine, there are two types of good, namely, *uti* and *frui*. The former represent things that are good for the sake of something else, the latter, things that are good in and of themselves, simply for their own sake. Being good for their own sake, these latter do not need to be referred beyond themselves for their value. Indeed, we may call such goods “gratuitous,” insofar as our attempt to explain the reason for their goodness finally comes to a rest in the things themselves: in the end, they are good because they *are*. Now, if it is the case, as we saw above, that, for Augustine, the will becomes the slave of that in which it seeks its happiness, the “use” of goods subordinates us to, and thus makes us in some respect the servant of, that for which they are used. But intrinsic goods have a value beyond their use. Our “enjoyment” of them therefore likewise places us beyond instrumentality; it makes us free. By adhering to what is good *in* itself, and inwardly participating in it, the will is no more determined by something outside of itself than is the good in which it shares. The *freedom* of this good thus becomes the will’s own freedom.

It is crucial to see, however, that this “not being determined by another” is *not* indeterminate and empty of all content, but is, to the contrary, perfectly full of content. What distinguishes freedom here from external determination is not the negating of the other, but the positive affirmation of relation with what is other, namely, the good. Augustine describes the ultimate, eschatological freedom

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philosophy for the truly, and necessarily, *receptive* spontaneity that we have seen is the key to Augustine’s notion of freedom.

as being “filled with all good”<sup>81</sup>; it is, in other words, a kind of saturation of determination as opposed to the mere open possibility of receiving determination. Here, our reflections connect on the one hand with Yves Simone’s helpful notion of “superdetermination,” a kind of boundless potency, which he offers in the place of “indeterminacy” as the distinguishing feature of true freedom,<sup>82</sup> and they also connect on the other with the more general cultural observations of Josef Pieper and Hugo Rahner on the free enjoyment of that which transcends mere usefulness, i.e., the leisure and play which are indispensable to genuine human life.<sup>83</sup>

We saw earlier that, since the will is dependent in some sense in all of its acts, it finds freedom to the extent that it makes itself dependent on what is truly good, and these last reflections show why this is the case: the will shares in the goodness of that to which it binds itself. This notion has two implications worth noticing. First of all, the degree of the freedom that the will finds is proportionate to the “absoluteness” of the good to which it binds itself. In other words, it is precisely the *intrinsic* nature of the goodness of the will’s object that liberates it. But a good of this sort, however much it may be an object of the will’s free choice, can never be merely a function of that choice—i.e., it can never be merely an “option”—precisely to the extent that its goodness is something to be enjoyed rather than used, to the extent that it is an intrinsic or absolute good rather than an instrumental one. While we tend to think of having freedom only

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<sup>81</sup>*De civ.*, XXII, 30 [1089].

<sup>82</sup>We, however, have a crucial difference with Simone on this point: while he makes “superdetermination,” the abundance of actuality that gives the will its freedom, something that resides in the will itself (“ . . . it is in the will that we find the energy [i.e., the superdeterminate actuality] which the object lacks [150]), we insist that the will has this character only in the actual possession of something intrinsically good. What is at stake in this difference is the question to what extent freedom is essentially relational, and to what extent the will is always structurally receptive in its spontaneity. On this point, the passage from Maritain that Simone appeals to in this context offers more support for our position than for his: “For [the will] pours out upon that particular good, of itself wholly incapable of determining it, the superabundant determination it receives from its necessary object, good as such” (Maritain, *A Preface to Metaphysics: Seven Lectures in Being* [New York: Sheed and Ward, 1948], 103).

<sup>83</sup>See Hugo Rahner, *Man At Play*, translated by Brian Battershaw and Edward Quinn (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), and Josef Pieper, *Leisure as the Basis of Culture*, translated by Alexander Dru (New York: Random House, 1963).

with respect to those things under our control, it is in fact the case that our freedom is dependent on things having a goodness beyond our choosing, beyond our capacity to decide about them. For Augustine, if everything were completely under our control, we would have no freedom: this is just the “flip side” of his description of perfect freedom as the state of being “immovably fixed” in the good.

The second point to notice is that it is only such a conception that allows us to think of freedom, not just as a means to achieve what we take to be good, but already as being itself something intrinsically good. Earlier, we saw that the conception of freedom as pure, and therefore empty, choice is the subjective correlate of a world without value; if we start, by contrast, with the affirmation of intrinsic, “non-optional” goodness, we arrive, in turn, at a notion of freedom as possessing a value within itself, as being a state to be enjoyed rather than merely an instrument by which to seek enjoyment. The view of freedom as indeterminate possibility is tied to an instrumentalist conception of freedom insofar as both view the relationship to goodness in an extrinsic manner: freedom thus conceived is something that can be, and perhaps ought to be, *used* to attain what is good, but simply in itself it is empty. Liberal and conservative debates over freedom tend to remain stuck on this point: both take for granted a view of freedom as an instrument, but while liberals insist we ought to be left in control of this instrument (the so-called “negative” view of freedom—“freedom from”), conservatives argue that we should be obliged to use this instrument to make particular choices (the so-called “positive” view of freedom—“freedom for”). But Augustine has a different view. The possibility that we associate with freedom is not indeterminate possibility, but rather the possibility that springs from actuality: the *power* to adhere to the good arises from our attachment to it; the greater the actuality, the greater the possibility. It is this view that allows Augustine to attach an absolute value to freedom, to regard it not only as a *means* to the enjoyment of what is good, but as an *object* of enjoyment itself.<sup>84</sup> In Gilson’s words, “man is truly free when he acts in such a way that the object of his delight is freedom

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<sup>84</sup>See *De ver.*, xlvi, 93 [89]: “He who delights in liberty seeks to be free from the love of mutable things.”

itself.”<sup>85</sup> It is also why Augustine identifies freedom with joy<sup>86</sup>—not that we need freedom in order to find joy, but that freedom and joy are ultimately the same thing insofar as both are the possession of the good. In *De Diversis Quaestionibus*, LXXXIII, 35, 2, Augustine affirms that, to love eternal things is to become eternal; analogously, we could say: to love free things—i.e., things of intrinsic goodness, whose value transcend the use that can be made of them—is to become free. Indeed, in the end, we are saying the same thing.

### 5. Freedom and beauty

The mention of joy, intrinsic goodness, and love leads us to Augustine’s notion of beauty. While this rich notion exceeds the present context, a brief observation on the relationship between freedom and beauty makes a fitting conclusion, if only because it sets into striking relief the difference between Augustine’s view and freedom and the conventional one. I suggest that beauty ties together the various elements that constitute genuine freedom, to such an extent that, according to the logic of Augustine’s view, a world without beauty will be a world without freedom. As Emmanuel Chapman has shown, beauty represents, for Augustine, the proper object of love.<sup>87</sup> It does so because beauty is what elicits delight, and indeed, delight of a certain type: namely, an essentially *contemplative* joy. Now, for Augustine, the joy brought by beauty serves to integrate the human faculties. A will that instrumentalizes its objects as mere options entails, as we saw, a fragmented psychology, wherein the human faculties work not only independently of, but even in opposition to, one another. Within the experience of beauty, by contrast, insofar as it connects the intellectual apprehension of an object and the delight it gives, the experience of beauty brings

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<sup>85</sup>Gilson, *Introduction à l'étude de Saint Augustin*, 211.

<sup>86</sup>See Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 30, “This is what constitutes true freedom: joy experienced in doing what is right,” cited in Clark, 125.

<sup>87</sup>Emmanuel Chapman, *Saint Augustine’s Philosophy of Beauty* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1939), 1–12. On beauty as the proper object of love, see *Conf.*, IV, 13, 20; *De Musica* VI, 13. Augustine also says that goodness is the sole object of love (*De trin.*, viii, 3). There need be no difficulties in reconciling these assertions, as Chapman argues: 102, n.1.

together both truth and goodness, and thus engages the whole of the spiritual faculties, both the intellect and the will, together at once.

Moreover, joy in beauty is specifically *contemplative* precisely because it rests in a good perceived as an end in itself and thus in a certain respect absolute. As Chapman puts it, “Beauty is seen and loved for its own sake, and in this sense can be called absolute.”<sup>88</sup> But it is precisely the absolute nature of the goodness beauty presents that, on the one hand, lifts us beyond the merely useful, and, on the other hand, enables a whole-hearted consent. In other words, it is by being absolute that beauty makes freedom possible. If freedom is original participation in intrinsic goodness, beauty is the invitation to freedom, because it is the radiation of a goodness beyond our immediate control. If we wish to encapsulate this Augustinian insight into freedom in a nutshell, we could say that freedom is the fruit of beauty.

We have come quite far from the conventional notion of freedom. If freedom is choice, then the political order, insofar as it wishes to promote freedom, must seek as far as possible to multiply options. But if freedom is original participation in intrinsic goodness, then the simple multiplication of options undermines freedom. If freedom is choice, then the affirmation of things as *intrinsically* good, as having a value independent of any will and therefore as making a claim on the will, is a threat to freedom because it establishes a limit to power. The conception we developed from Augustine, however, dissociates freedom from power or the capacity to control. Freedom is *dependent* on the existence of things of intrinsic value. A world of mere options is a world without the possibility of freedom. There can be no freedom except in the presence of goods that are precisely “non-negotiable”—insofar as what is utterly “negotiable” (*neg-otium*, the negation of leisure or enjoyment of things for their own sake) is stripped of any intrinsic value. A political order, then, does not protect freedom by refusing to commit itself to substantive goods, but in fact must so commit itself in order to ensure freedom. To cultivate freedom, a political order must present goods, not indifferently as possible objects of choice, but compellingly as things worthy of being loved precisely because they possess a goodness over which we have no control. In other words, because they are, before all else, things of beauty.

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<sup>88</sup>Chapman, *Saint Augustine's Philosophy of Beauty*, 49.

“Late have I loved thee, o beauty, so ancient and so new: late have I loved thee.” Augustine is here describing something essential to the aesthetic experience: Our love for beauty *always* comes “late” because beauty moves us before we can move ourselves. And this is just why beauty, more than any expansion of choices, sets us free.\* □

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