

# Augustine and Martin Luther on Free Will From the enslaved will to the bondage of the will

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the comparison between Augustine's and Luther's understanding of the bondage of the will. As a philosopher of will, Augustine establishes the independence of the will in his earlier work. In his debate with Julian of Eclanum that comes from his later period, Augustine emphasizes grace and original sin. The salvation and freedom of humans rely on the Holy Spirit. In the debate with Erasmus, Luther introduced the conception of the necessity of will. However, both thinkers have different understandings of faith. Augustine has an intellectual understanding of faith, while Luther is a fideist.

**Key words:** Augustine, Martin Luther, free will

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Understanding the relationship and comparison between Augustine and Luther has been a continual focus of scholarship.<sup>(1)</sup> *Prima facie*, there are many similarities between these two great thinkers. For instance, both emphasize the priority of grace and original sin. Augustine, however, confronts the dialogue between ancient Greek philosophy and Christianity, while Luther lives in the era of the collapse of natural theology and the premodern time. Not unrelated to this fact, they each have different approaches toward God and reason.

In order to make a comparison between them, I will focus on the discussion of the bondage of will by Augustine and Luther. Augustine's understanding of will also had a great impact on Luther, who quotes Augustine's works in many different places in *De servo arbitrio*.<sup>(2)</sup> Augustine's understanding of will is labeled as "enslaved will", especially in his anti-Julian works.<sup>(3)</sup> As a polemic writing, *De servo arbitrio* can immediately remind us of the debate between Augustine and Julian of Eclanum.<sup>(4)</sup>

In the first part, I will present the characteristics of Augustine's understanding of the will and the debate between Augustine and Julian of Eclanum. In the second part, I will present Luther's understanding of will in *De servo arbitrio*. Luther argues that there is no freedom of will in the relationship between human beings and God. In this way, free will is an empty name. In the last part, we can show that Augustine and Luther have different understandings of faith. Augustine can be seen as having an intellectual understanding of faith, while Luther is a fideist.

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(1) Volker Henning Drecoll: *Augustins Handbuch*, Mohr Siebeck, 615-622; Mathias Mütel, „Augustins Bedeutung für Martin Luthers Rechtfertigungslehre“, in *Annales Theologici* 2017, Vol. 31, No. 2, pp. 473-485; Christian Danz, „Der unfreie Wille Augustin und Luther über göttliche Gnade und Freiheit des Menschen“ in *Augustinus und Luther Zur Verwandtschaft zweier <Kirchenväter> Beiträge des 15. Würzburger Augustinus-Studentages vom 19. Mai 2017*, Echter Verlag, 2019, 89-102.

(2) For example, Luther quotes *De spiritu et litera* and *Contra Iulianum* in LW, 33, 108.

(3) Lenka Karfiková, *Grace and the Will according to Augustine*. Vol. 115. Brill, 2012.

(4) Kurt Flasch, *Kampfplätze der Philosophie: große Kontroversen von Augustin bis Voltaire*. Klostermann, 2008.

## I. Augustine on the free will

### (1) Independence of the will

Before we analyze the debate between Augustine and Julian of Eclanum, we should give a brief summary of Augustine's theory of will in his earlier period. In his Anti-Manichaean work *De libero arbitrio*, Augustine provides his solution to the theodicy question by introducing will (*voluntas*) and free decision (*liberum arbitrium*). He argues that human will is responsible for sin and evil, in order to argue against Manichaeism.

In the response to the question of evil, Augustine established the criterium of will: (1) The independence of the will, namely that the will is neither compelled by desire (*cupiditas*) nor by God. Augustine provides a metaphysical argument for the independence of will. Augustine argues that free will as a middle good (*medium bonum*) cannot be influenced by the body (*corpus*), which is a small good (*parvum bonum*) and thus less powerful. Meanwhile, the just God can never compel humans to sin. Therefore, only the will can decide itself, that is to say, will is the bearer of the punishment or the grace of God. (2) The compatibility between God's providence (*providentia*) and will. Augustine argues that the free decision of human beings cannot be intervened by God. Even though God knows that I will do something x at a certain time, doing x is also done because of the decision of the will. Besides, Augustine makes a distinction between God's providence (*providentia dei*) and necessity (*necessitas*). In other words, God's providence is not a compulsion for human actions. (3) The contrast between will and nature: Augustine points out that the will can either turn to God or turn to the lesser good – body. That is to say, the will has the freedom to make a choice between turning upward or falling down. In contrast, the stone can only fall down because of its weight. When it comes to the question, whence comes the will to commit a sin, Augustine's answer is the will itself.

It should be noted that the independence of the will has two important resources in ancient Greek philosophy. On the one hand, the Neoplatonic understanding of the world helps Augustine to consider will as a middle good. The difference between Augustine and Neoplatonism lies in that Augustine does not regard the body or matter as the source of evil. On the other hand, Augustine's understanding of the power of the will is rooted in the discussion of "ta eph'hemin" in the Stoic tradition. Augustine transfers this discussion into the context of theodicy and advocates for the power of the will. I will label it as a normative and ideal understanding of the will. It is a more metaphysical description and argumentation of the will. In the next part, we will show the existential dimension of will, especially regarding the original sin.

### (2) The necessary sin and the chain of will

It is widely accepted that Augustine establishes a new understanding of grace after his continuous commentaries on Paul's letter, especially after Augustine finished the work *Ad Simplicianum* I.2 in 397. In this work, Augustine sets grace at the center of his thought and emphasizes that grace is based neither on human efforts nor on human will.<sup>(5)</sup>

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(5) For the details, see Teng He, "Rethinking the Relationship between Grace and Free Will in *Ad Simplicianum* I 2", in *Studia Patristica*:VOL. CXIX, Peeters,2021, pp.67-76.

There is a historical-theological background for Augustine's understanding of will, namely the primal sin of Adam and Eve. The postlapsarian humans have inherited the original sin. In the eschatological world, the sin will be healed by God. There are three types of freedom regarding the relationship between power and sin, namely "to be able to sin" (*posse peccare*), "to be unable not to sin" (*non posse non peccare*), and "to be unable to sin" (*non posse peccare*). Adam and Eve can freely commit sin. Postlapsarian humans are no longer able to have a free choice between right and wrong. The human beings in the eschatological state cannot commit sin.

Augustine has also a very famous paragraph on the chain of will in *Confessiones* VIII, 5,10:

"This is what I was sighing for, being tied down not by irons outside myself, but by my own iron will. The Enemy had control of the power of my will and from it he had fashioned a chain for me and had bound me in it. For, lust is the product of perverse will, and when one obeys lust habit is produced, and when one offers no resistance to habit necessity is produced. By means, as it were, of these interconnected links- whence the chain I spoke of-I was held in the grip of a harsh bondage. But, the new will, which had begun to be in me, to serve Thee for Thy own sake and to desire to enjoy Thee, God, the only sure Joyfulness, was not yet capable of overcoming the older will which was strengthened by age. Thus, my two voluntary inclinations, one old and the other new, one carnal and the other spiritual, were engaged in mutual combat and were tearing my soul apart in the conflict."<sup>(6)</sup>

We can make the following notes. First, the new will and the old will are not two souls or two substances, as Manichaeism claims. For both should be seen as the volitions of the single and the entire will. Second, the "chain of the will" (*catena voluntatis*) is the conflict between the new will and the old will, which are respectively correlated to spirit and flesh. The new will is spiritual and is directed toward the unchangeable God, whereas the old will is directed toward the changeable good. Thus, Paul's "struggle of the flesh" is interpreted by Augustine as a struggle within the will. Last, we can see that the old will or the inclination to the changeable world is within the will itself. Because of it, humans cannot avoid sin and achieve true freedom.

### (3) The enslaved will

Augustine's pessimistic understanding of human will was attacked by Pelagian in 412. From then on, they began a famous controversy in the history of the ancient church. In 418, Pelagianism was condemned at the Council of Carthage. Julian of Eclanum, the supporter of Pelagianism, was not satisfied with this condemnation and attacked Augustine's position. Let us now focus on their debate on the understanding of will.

Julian of Eclanum defines the will as "the movement of the mind which has in its power either to descend toward evil on the left or to strive toward noble things on the right."<sup>(7)</sup>

From this definition, Julian believes that with free will people can choose between good and evil. In the debate with Julian, Augustine emphasizes that human beings have already inherited the original sin of Adam and suffered in the punishment of God (*poena*). Augustine believes that all humans have inherited the sin of Adam and

(6) *Confessiones* VIII.5.10 "Cui rei ego suspirabam ligatus non ferro alieno, sed mea ferrea voluntate. Velle meum tenebat inimicus et inde mihi catenam fecerat et constrinxerat me. Quippe ex voluntate perversa facta est libido, et dum servitur libidini, facta est consuetudo, et dum consuetudini non resistitur, facta est necessitas. Quibus quasi ansulis sibimet innexis (unde catenam appellavi) tenebat me obstrictum dura servitus. Voluntas autem nova, quae mihi esse coeperat, ut te gratis colerem fruique te vellem, Deus, sola certa iucunditas, nondum erat idonea ad superandam priorem vetustate roboratam. Ita duae voluntates meae, una vetus, alia nova, illa carnalis, illa spiritalis, confligebant inter se atque discordando dissipabant animam meam." translated by Vernon J. Bourke.

(7) *Contra Iulianum*: opus imperfectum, I, 46, "Voluntas itaque motus est animi, in iure suo habentis utrum sinisterior ad prava decurrat, an dexterior ad celsa contendat."

Eve, including the newborn children.<sup>(8)</sup> In other words, although the newborn children do not have free will, they are condemned to sin.

There is also a difference regarding the conception of grace. Julian advocates synergism, while Augustine advocates monergism. According to Augustine, human beings cannot redeem themselves. Grace precedes human merit (*meritum*), namely the will (*voluntas*) and works (*opus*). Augustine emphasizes that the gain of the love of God (*caritas Dei*) does not rely on the choice of the will. The Holy Spirit can produce a direct effect on free choice. This is indicated by the following reference to “the love of God which is poured out in our hearts, not by a choice of the will which comes from us, but by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Rom 5:5).”<sup>(9)</sup>

According to Augustine, the turning or conversion of the will relies on the influence of the Holy Spirit, which pours love into the heart of humans, in order that the will can be moved and turned to the good. In the grace of God, humans are not able to do bad things. This cannot be seen as a denial of freedom of human beings, but rather a realization of freedom under the grace of God. The freedom here does not denote what libertarianism claims, i.e. the principle of the alternative possibility (PAP), which means that one can choose among different options. In contrast, freedom under grace means liberation from the possibility to commit sin.

## II. The bondage of the will

Luther’s conception of free will (*liberum arbitrium*) is mainly discussed in the work *De servo arbitrio*, which is a polemical writing directed against Erasmus. Erasmus stands for a more humanist understanding of the will, while Luther denies the freedom of will. In the following, I will present Luther’s understanding of free choice (*liberum arbitrium*) and freedom.

### (1) The definition of *liberum arbitrium*

In chapter three of *De servo arbitrio*, Luther analyzes Erasmus’ definition of free choice (*liberum arbitrium*), quoting it as follows:

“By free choice in this place we mean a power of the human will by which a man can apply himself to the things which lead to eternal salvation, or turn away from them.”<sup>(10)</sup>

We can make the following comments on this definition. The Latin term *arbitrium* stems from the verb *arbitrari*, which means to choose or to judge. Historically speaking, the Latin term *liberum arbitrium* was first used by Tertullian in the Christian tradition.<sup>(11)</sup> In Augustine, free choice is characterized by power and can also be traced back to the discussion of *eph’hemin/ in potestate* in the Stoic philosophy.

For Luther, there is another important background, namely the discussion between voluntarism and intellectualism in the late scholastic era, which is represented respectively by Franciscans and Dominicans. This debate is rooted in the definition of *liberum arbitrium* in Peter Lombard’s *Sententia*, which is “the very power and ability of will and reason.”<sup>(12)</sup> However, it will be further asked, whether *liberum arbitrium* belongs to the faculty

(8) *Contra Iulianum*: opus imperfectum, I,49.

(9) *Contra Iulianum Imperfectum* I.83 “...caritas Dei, quae diffusa est in cordibus nostris, non per voluntatis arbitrium, quod est a nobis, sed per Spiritum Sanctum qui datus est nobis.”

(10) LW33, 102-103; “Porro liberum arbitrium hoc loco sentimus vim humanae voluntatis, qua se possit homo applicare ad ea, quae perducunt ad aeternam salutem, aut ab iisdem avertere.” WA18, 675:30.

(11) Theo Kobusch, „Selbstbestimmte Freiheit. Das frühe Christentum im Kontext der antiken Philosophie“, ZNT-Zeitschrift für Neues Testament 17.34 (2014), S.50.

(12) Peter Lombard, *Sententiae* II, XXV, 1. Luther mentions Lombard in LW33, 108.

of will or the faculty of reason. Thomas Aquinas, the representative of intellectualism, regards the will as a rational appetite (*appetitus intellectualis*) and thus the byproduct of the intellect. Aquinas does not distinguish between will and reason and places greater emphasis on the priority of reason. In the eyes of Scotus, Aquinas' understanding of will can be labeled as intellectual determinism. Briefly speaking, if the will is seen as a byproduct of reason, then the will is decided by the judgment of reason. Moreover, the reason is always directed to the rational structure. In order to establish the real freedom of God, Scotus emphasizes the priority of will to reason. Therefore, freedom is not based on reason, but on the will. In other words, man is free by virtue of his will.

So far so good. We can turn back to Luther. Luther notes that the term “vis” (power) is the synonym of “*facultas*” (faculty), which denotes the power of the human will. He comments that free choice is “a capacity or faculty or ability or aptitude for willing, unwilling, selecting, neglecting, approving, rejecting, and whatever other actions of the will there are.”<sup>(13)</sup>

According to Luther, there are two levels of freedom, which are based on his distinction between “before God” (*coram deo*) and “before humans” (*coram hominibus*). Luther does not deny that humans possess freedom of action before humans, for example, people can freely choose what they want to eat and wear. However, Luther denies the freedom of will before God. In other words, humans cannot freely choose between turning away or turning to salvation. Regarding the relationship between God and humans, there is only a necessity.

We can see Luther's comments on Erasmus' three types of freedom.

“The first one is: Man cannot will the good without special grace, but can still desire and endeavor.

The second one is: Free choice is of no avail save to sin and grace alone accomplishes good in us.

The third one is: Free choice is a mere empty name. God works both good and evil in us and all things come about by sheer necessity.”<sup>(14)</sup>

At first sight, the first statement was ascribed to the position of Pelagianism and Erasmus who both emphasize the freedom of will in salvation. This can be labeled as synergism. The second statement can be ascribed to Augustine, which is labeled as monergism. The third one is Luther's understanding, which is theological determinism.

Luther concludes with this remark:

“For when it has been conceded and agreed that free choice, having lost its liberty, is perforce in bondage to sin and cannot will anything good, I can make no other sense of these words than that free choice is an empty phrase, of which the reality has been lost. Lost liberty, according to my grammar, is no liberty at all, and to give the name of liberty to something that has no liberty, is to employ an empty phrase.”<sup>(15)</sup>

In this paragraph, Luther argues that free choice is no more than an empty name. For it has already lost its liberty to choose between what is good or wrong. There is no freedom in the human will, but rather the necessity (*necessitas*) of God's determination. “...in relation to God, or in matters pertaining to salvation or damnation, a man has no free choice, but is a captive, subject and slave either of the will of God or the will of Satan.”<sup>(16)</sup>

But we must make some clarification of Luther's understanding of necessity (*necessitas*). The necessity of the will does not mean that the will is compelled by God. Luther makes a distinction between necessity (*necessitas*) and compulsion (*coactio*). This distinction echoes Augustine's understanding of the relationship between necessity

(13) LW 33,105.

(14) LW 33,112.

(15) LW 33,116.

(16) LW 33, 69.

and providence. The necessity means “necessity of immutability”<sup>(17)</sup> Under such necessity, “the will cannot change itself and turn in a different direction.”<sup>(18)</sup>

Here we can make a contrast between Augustine and Luther. By Luther, there is no need to make a distinction between *posse peccare*, *non posse non peccare* and *non posse peccare*, as Augustine does. All human beings are under the necessity and have no freedom in the relationship with God. In contrast, Augustine claim that Adam and Eve possess the freedom to commit original sin.

### III. The different understanding of faith: intellectualist vs. fideist

In this part, we would like to analyze the understanding of faith (*fides*) to show the difference between Augustine’s and Luther’s conception of will. I will focus on two aspects: (1) The attitude toward philosophy and reason; (2) The relationship between reason and will.

As is known, Augustine is influenced by Neoplatonism and built his understanding of Christianity through philosophy. His philosophical slogan is “faith searching understanding” (*fides quaerens rationem*). Augustine would like to harmonize the Neoplatonic philosophy and the doctrine of Church traditions. In other words, Augustine tries to construct a rational approach to his own Christian faith.

The most outstanding proof text can be found in *De Trinitate*. He argues that belief in Jesus does not depend on how we imagine him but rather upon a priori notions of humans. “For an idea has been impressed upon human nature as if it were a law, according to which, when we see any such thing, we at once recognize it as a man or as the form of a man.”<sup>(19)</sup> Augustine argues that species and genera are not derived from experience. They are imprinted in us (*impressa in nobis*), referring to a priori notions.<sup>(20)</sup> Therefore, faith in Jesus is thus not dependent on history, but rather on the form of humans. Thus, he has a very rational and metaphysical approach toward Jesus. For Augustine, faith cannot be separated from his intellectual-Platonic background.

In contrast, Luther is not satisfied with previous rational efforts to understand the Christian faith. Luther has a more negative attitude toward the reason. The historical background of Luther is the rise of modernity. In his monograph *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, Michael Gillespie argues that the origin of modernity lies in the theological crisis in the late scholastic era, which has been raised by three eading figures who all spent time in Avignon, namely Meister Eckhart, and William of Occam and Francesco Petrarca. Gillespie’s focus is to illustrate the challenge of nominalism, which destroyed the traditional rational metaphysical understanding of God and the world. In 1277, the bishop of Paris, Étienne Tempier issued a condemnation against Aristotelianism.

According to Gillespie, there are the following features of nominalism. (1) The voluntaristic understanding of God: The nominalist Occam distinguishes the ordinary power (*potentia ordinata*) from absolute power (*potentia absoluta*). Based on this distinction, God is characterized by absolute potency and far beyond human understanding. (2) The emphasis on individuality: The nominalist does not investigate the common nature. This is labeled as the way of modernity (*via moderna*), which is different from the way of antiquity (*via antiqua*). According to the way

(17) LW 33, 64.

(18) LW 33, 64.

(19) *De trinitate* VIII.4.7 “Habemus enim quasi regulariter infixam naturae humanae notitiam, secundum quam quidquid tale aspicimus, statim hominem esse cognoscimus, vel hominis formam.”

(20) Augustine avoids Plato’s teaching of recollection which is bonded to the preexistence of the soul. Augustine criticizes Plato’s theory of recollection in *De trinitate* XII.15.24.

of modernity, the world consists of individuals. Meanwhile, they try to construct a direct relationship between God and human beings. <sup>(21)</sup>

Now we come back to Luther. In *De servo arbitrio*, Luther argues that God is hidden (absconditus). “This life or eternal salvation, however, is something that passes human comprehension.” <sup>(22)</sup> Luther emphasizes that God is not intelligible and charges reason with foolishness and blindness. In particular, due to the misuse of reason, there are different understandings of the Bible. <sup>(23)</sup> Regarding the relationship between humans and God, humans are finite, while God is infinite. God can be only characterized by power and will. Luther says, “God’s will is effectual and cannot be hindered, since it is the power of the divine nature itself.” <sup>(24)</sup> The will of God is the necessity of humans.

Based on this understanding of God, Luther can only turn to the inner faith. According to Luther, the faith in Christ must be centered on the teaching of Jesus. In *De libertate christiana*, Luther emphasizes that faith refers to the inner man, rather than to the external man, which is instead related to wealth and fame. Luther makes a contrast between faith with works. Luther emphasizes that humans’ justification is depends on faith rather than on works.

After all, Augustine makes a very strong inward turn, but this turn is still more rationalistic. For example, Augustine sees self-reflexive reflection on reason as part of this inward turn and as something that will lead us toward God. Luther has a more radical turn to the inner self which is more subjective and less rationalistic. For Luther, faith is not based on a philosophy-related objective value, but rather on subjective certainty. Thus, we can label Luther as a fideist.

## IV. Conclusion

This paper has separately discussed the understanding of will by Augustine and Martin Luther. Both can be seen as the opposite of libertarianism, denying freedom relies on another alternative. Even though both thinkers emphasize the grace of God and original sin, Luther goes further in his understanding of the will because of the influence of Nominalism. On one hand, Luther sees the importance of the incomprehensibility and power of God. On the other hand, Luther emphasizes the priority of will over reason. Regarding the understanding of faith, Augustine advocates an intellectual faith and seeks understanding. In contrast, Luther is less rationalistic and more subjective.

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(21) Michael Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, Harvard University, Chapter I.

(22) LW 33, 105.

(23) LW 33, 111; 117; 121.

(24) LW 33, 38. “Voluntas euini Dei efficax est, quae impediri non potest, cum sit naturalis ipsa potentia Dei.”

## 中文题目:

# 奥古斯丁与路德论自由意志

——从“奴役的自由”到“意志的捆绑”

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**提要:** 本文比较了奥古斯丁与路德对“意志捆绑”的理解。作为意志哲学家,奥古斯丁在他早期的著作中确立了意志的独立性。但奥氏在晚年与埃克兰的朱利安的辩论中强调恩典和原罪。奥古斯丁认为,人的得救与自由依靠圣灵的作用。路德在与伊拉斯谟的辩论中引入了意志必然性的概念。然而,两位思想家的信仰观存在着不同。奥古斯丁对信仰有理智的理解,而路德是信仰主义者。

**关键词:** 奥古斯丁、路德、自由意志