

How Jewish Philosophy Could Help Standard Philosophical Ethics

Out of its Dead End

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I challenge here the claim of modern philosophical ethics to universality and reframe it instead as an expression of an unacknowledged Christian cultural provincialism. I expose standard philosophical ethics as originating in a version of Platonism Christianized in very specific ways especially by Augustine, which were then further modified and hardened into a number of dogmatic Christian theological voluntarist (free will) theses mandated in the thirteenth century. Voluntarism, freedom of the will, implies a human person who is outside of nature and history: the mind and self are seen as not indelibly marked by natural endowment, historical and social context but instead are thought to have the power to transcend them. It sets as the human ideal an absolute mastery over and power to originate the self and largely the world, as well. I argue here that in presupposing that free will is necessary for any account of moral responsibility, philosophical ethics, both analytic and continental, displays a Christian provincialism that maintains and secularizes, and thereby disguises and bolsters, a miraculous view of the human person. The human person, as it were, intervenes from 'above' into nature and history on the analogy of the way that God intervenes miraculously in biblical creation and history. A few recent philosophers of ethics have recognized that free will is a "mystery" but none, as far as I know, has fully recognized its Christian religious origins and character although Owen Flanagan lays blame for the problem generally on a Western notion of 'soul'. The doctrine of the freedom of the will is problematic because it both mis-describes the human person and also has negative personal, social, and public policy consequences. Assigning to the individual complete responsibility for his or her triumphs or failures aggrandizes the privileged and blames the poor and needy for their situation. It suggests that all solutions are individual rather than primarily social and systemic. It protects the privileged and absolves institutions and their power structures.

But the deeper philosophical problem with standard philosophical ethics is that it is simply wrong. The doctrine of the freedom of the will is a mistaken account of the human person and one that entails unsavory consequences: a tendency to triumphalism, to blame the victim and aggrandize the victor and hence it rationalizes and justifies privilege; a failure to see moral actions as necessary consequences of natural and social systems and therefore to focus on isolating the moral violator and assigning punishment as vengeance and coercion rather than on wider understandings that could recommend more indirect ways to effect social and personal change; the rejection of compassion, empathy while not of pity. It has a tendency to devolve into individual arrogance and self-righteousness and into socio-political imperialism. Other religio-cultural viewpoints on ethics need to be looked at as potential resources for a cultural corrective.

Tentative conclusions: Human beings without the presupposition of free will are necessarily marked by their context, history, situation, communities, and natural endowments. We act as who we are and must be rather than from a freedom of choice that can (allegedly) erase all that defines us. We enact our identities, histories, and predicaments as well as our developing understandings and changing conditions. While the normative Christian philosophical tradition in its attempt to assign exclusive praise and blame to the individual developed a notion of free will that rent the person from all constituting contexts, interestingly, many other cultural versions of ethics, for example, the Navajo and the Buddhist as well as the Spinozist consider the quintessential ethical achievement exactly the opposite: namely, the individual's coming to embrace and see oneself as constituted by the widest webs of relation (natural, social, and cultural) is for them the sine qua non of ethics. While the reformulation of ethics without free will would vitiate, or at least challenge or alter, standard notions and assignments of praise and blame, it would not necessarily affect standard notions of human rights. For all that is needed for the standard notion of rights is a distinction between inner necessity and external compulsion. That distinction remains intact and hence human rights based on the entitlement to be free from various forms of external compulsion would stand. The issue, however, deserves further examination. The attenuation of the legitimacy of assigning praise and blame primarily to individuals rather than to entire constellations of contexts, natural and socio-historical, and also of the punitive significance, rather than the mere restrictive quality, of punishment are without

doubt startling and potentially transforming implications, as is the need to rethink the value of guilt and not only of shame as proper moral motivations.

WHAT HAPPENED TO ETHICS?

When I say that ethics, as standard philosophical ethics frames it and our so called ‘intuitions’ about what ethics is and how it functions, are normative Christian ones, I am not speaking only or primarily about values but instead about how many of us think about what a human person is and ought to be, how human beings fit into the cosmos, and the standard assumptions about our capacity to originate our actions. Even today these remain in crucial respects shaped by normative Christian presuppositions, albeit in disguised and indirect ways. This is true not only of the inchoate beliefs and assumptions enacted by the unself-conscious layperson but perhaps, ironically, it is even more pronounced in the highly mannered and disciplined ethical discussions, and discussions about ethics, of the philosophic elite. The Christian cultural *idiosyncrasy* and *narrowness* of ethics as a standard Western philosophic discipline and tradition struck me with jarring force a year or so ago when I began to explore why philosophic discussions of ethics always seemed to me so off the mark, so out of keeping with my own presuppositions, presuppositions nurtured in the medieval Judaeo-Arabic philosophic tradition and culminating in Spinoza, about how ethics operates in the human person and in society, what kind of thing ethics is and what it means for a person to be ethical or act ethically. I was struck, too, with what seemed to be a resonance between mainstream philosophers and much of the general public, that is, what I saw in my students. Either students were simply awe-struck by their Philosophy professors or, more likely in today’s Academy, they seemed generally to share the same world of assumptions of their professors about ethics. It made *gut sense to them*, the standard philosophical descriptions of ethics –of thinking through, talking together about, coming to decisions, making personal moral choices and then acting upon them; that series captured their naïve presuppositions about how they themselves thought about and practiced ethics. My own discomfort with this description had always kept me away from the field of Ethics although I described my overriding interest all along as moral psychology or philosophical psychology: how thinking and affect, that is, emotion, were held to function together or interact according to a number of historical thinkers, and, lately, how they might be related and inform each other according to recent discoveries in the neurosciences and in other fields of biology. I discovered that colleagues brought up as I was, so to speak, in the tradition of Judaeo-Arabic and Islamic Arabic

philosophy and its modern version had a similar aversion to Ethics as described and practiced as a discipline in the contemporary academy: it made little gut sense to many of us either professionally or personally and we tended to stay clear of it. Many of us saw ourselves as working and acting in a different thought world. For the last couple of years I have been on a search to discover the sources of my discomfort and tease out the historical strands. But first it was important to articulate the problem with far more precision.

Christine M. Korsgaard in the Introduction to her *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*ⁱ articulates well the centrality of conscious free choice as the *sine qua non* of contemporary approaches to ethics. Although Korsgaard is a noted interpreter of Kant, her presuppositions are widely accepted across rival camps:

Our practically rational nature ... brings with it both the capacity and the necessity of *choosing*ⁱⁱ our actions. *Choice is our plight, our inescapable fate, as rational beings.*ⁱⁱⁱ The project of critical moral philosophy is to determine what resources we can find in reason for solving the problem which reason itself has set for us. Since we are looking for laws for the employment of *our powers of choice and action, we do not, in this investigation, regard ourselves as natural, causally determined beings—as the objects of scientific understanding. We regard ourselves as free, as the authors of our actions.* This is not because there is any reason to deny that we are natural, causally determined beings, but because for the purpose at hand [namely, ethics], that conception of ourselves is *irrelevant*.^{iv}

Bob Gibbs whispered to me at a conference a couple of years ago that in the Middle Ages we Jews did philosophy as Muslims and today we do philosophy as Christians. Is Korsgaard being philosophically *Christian* as a Kantian or instead quintessentially *modern* rather than medieval? I have been exploring the former alternative and there is much evidence to support it. If the first option is generally right, what is the Christian background that is being played out even today, what are its salient features and what are its origins? If the Arabic tradition of the *fal asifa* assimilated the Greeks differently from the way the Christians did, where and when and what and, perhaps even, why? I have begun to realize that the old Wolfsonian foundation that I grew up with which took for granted that the three medieval philosophic traditions, the Islamic, Jewish, and Christian were basically parallel compromises between faith and reason, biblical literature and Greek philosophy, and differed from each other only in minor detail, cannot hold up. As I begin to study what happened, there seem to be two crucial periods of divergence, first, in the assimilation of Platonism in late Antiquity and then later in the 12th and 13th century encounter with the influx of Latin translations of Arabic philosophic texts. Regarding the first, I began to look at Augustine as the secondary literature directed me to (although other earlier assimilations of Ambrose--e.g. Ambrose's

insistence against the Greeks that animal and human souls are entirely different^v-- and of Origen and others need to be investigated as well) and I have been reading the literature on what were the crucial changes that Augustine introduced into the Platonism (and to a lesser extent Stoicism) of his era in Christianizing it. And I have so far come up with a few ideas of my own as well.

Initially, I would like to suggest two general changes that Augustine made in the Platonic-Plotinian world view that are fateful for ethics down the line: 1. The first is the innovation of removing the human person from the continuity of nature, from the Platonic explanatory framework of the natural-divine cosmos which the human person not only embodies but en-minds, so to speak, as her self-understanding in God. Even Peter Brown in his recent afterward to his now classic biographical study of Augustine, and as well as those scholars of both Platonism and of Augustine, A. H. Armstrong^{vi}, John Dillon, and John Rist, suggest that the Augustinian elimination from the assimilation of Platonism to Christianity of the discovery of the human within the cosmos and of the Plotinian joy and rapture in the divine beauty of the cosmic perspective is an unfortunate loss. To understand oneself in the latter tradition in its pagan form was to see oneself as an expression of divine cosmic forces, material and noetic, at work everywhere—it is to know the world as manifestation of God’s mind and to approximate the divine knowledge as the content of one’s own mind as knower of the cosmos. A. H. Armstrong in an essay on “Neoplatonic Valuations of Nature, Body and Intellect”^{vii} dispels the too familiar tendency to lay at the feet of Plato and Platonisms the rejection of the here-and-now, the denigration of the earthly in favor of flight into the beyond, when the countertendency is at least as pronounced in pagan Platonism, and even or especially in Plotinus himself. Plotinus, he writes, “seems sometimes so convinced of the value of life as we know it here below in all its moving diversity that he must find a place for it in his intelligible world even if it inevitably brings with it the values of change, movement and newness for which there is, on the official account, no room...”

The result is that [Plotinus’s] intelligible world sometimes becomes very much the natural world “seen from the inside”: and ... it is not remote from us. It is very much our world. ... This sort of Neoplatonism intensifies the enjoyment of the a world taken into oneself, in which one can follow the *logoi*, the imaginatively apprehended intelligibilities of the things perceived by the senses, ... and discover more beauty and value in them than is apparent at their first outward presentation. For those who have been influenced in this kind of way by Plotinus a glory comes upon the world from time to time. ... In this sort of “wild” Neoplatonism ... the sense world is liable to become, not just an image of the intelligible, but an icon.^{viii}

This in the Neoplatonic tradition we meet in the Arabs and Jews who filtered their Platonism through Aristotelian naturalism, embodiment, and non-dualism, which was also the legacy of the Alexandrian philosophical school whose continuation was in Baghdad. It weds the rapturous celebration of nature, and of nature as most accessible expression and participant in the divine, the mirror of the divine, with the *Symposium*'s erotic longing and mystical union as the other side of cognition, of understanding.

By contrast, henceforth, the Christian Augustinian understanding of the person separates the human from the natural, the providential destiny of nature from human destiny. Two divine plans operate, a historical as well as a natural, and the human is the subject of the former—even the soul is no longer inherently, naturally, so to speak, eternal as it was for the Greeks, but only so by the active intervention of divine grace. John Rist, in his study of the philosophical ideas of Augustine and both their emergence and difference from the classical philosophical tradition, writes as follows of this Augustinian innovation:

By 'natural order' Augustine now means only the order which we find in the physical world. As *The Literal Commentary on Genesis* will put it (8. 9.17), the operations of human (and angelic) wills are no longer included within the realm of 'nature'. Thus, briefly, 'eternal law' has come to have two areas of application: one in nature (excluding human and angelic agency), *the other in the will*. For the purposes of a study of human law and human institutions we need only be concerned with the relation of the eternal law to the will.
(Rist, pp. 214–215, my emphasis).

The mind identified primarily with the will is *non-natural*; only the bodily, the material, is natural or within the domain of nature. The latter move will have important implications for what is within the proper domain of science more than a thousand years later at the dawn of modern science and still haunts the human sciences to this day! The depiction of the mind as essentially characterized by will is picked up later and built upon by Descartes, as Stephen Menn argues in detail in his book on *Descartes and Augustine*. But even in its initial Augustinian version, to know the self is no longer in pagan philosophical fashion to know the self in and as a particular expression of universal and impersonal cosmic natural forces nor is knowledge of that kind the direct link of the divine and the human.^{ix}

2. The second crucial innovation, in my estimation, is the replacement of the Platonic equation of Love and Knowledge with Love and Will. By this I mean that the Platonic and generally Greek philosophic conviction (and cultural assumption, I believe) that the reform of the heart occurs only in a deep transformation of the mind, that is, through some sort of gain in knowledge and theoretical

understanding of the science of the day, or of any day, into which one extrudes the self and rethinks and re-imagines oneself—with all the emotional and motivational entailments—is replaced by Augustine with a transformation of the will or desire, in part through the intervention of Grace. Augustine is adamant that the transformation in question cannot happen by human initiative—a point lamented by the Plotinus scholar John Dillon in his review of the points of innovation introduced into Platonisms by Christian Platonists and also quite heatedly by Hilary Armstrong as well.^x The pagan philosophic claim of the human capacity to initiate perfection through deeper understanding, through reason and reason's deep transforming effects upon desire, amounted, in Augustine's view, to the pride at the basis of all sin; and so he roundly rejected Plotinus's, and the entire Greek philosophic tradition's, focus on the human capacity for initiating and engaging in a process of hoped-for self-perfection of the personality—a charge Augustine also lodged against Pelagius. Augustine thus rejected the classical answers to the problem the Greeks called *akrasia*, that is, of why we often know what we should do but don't do it, and vice versa. The Platonic tradition and the Neoplatonized Aristotelian philosophic tradition of the Arabs and Jews, by contrast, retained and developed the self-initiation of perfection and also the intertwining of heart and mind, desire and cognition. Real changes in thinking and understanding dug down to the deepest layers of the personality, they believed, and were transformative. It was deep self-knowledge within the natural world and the cosmos, the enhancement of contextual self-understanding, they believed, that could transform the heart. If we *still* do what we ought not to, and don't do what we ought, it is because our cognitive change has simply not been deep and broad enough; it has been superficial.

Augustine's position reworks Stoic theory as much as Platonic. For Stoic assent had meant a process of withholding and then passing judgment upon propositional claims; but assent is attributed by Augustine, instead, directly to the will itself. As Rist puts it, "Augustine de-intellectualized and 'Paulinized' the concept of the inner man. A grasp of intelligible realities, however achieved, is in itself no purification of the inner man or passage to the kingdom of God" (p. 206) as it had been for the Greeks and as it remained for the Arabic philosophic tradition. For Augustine the problem of *akrasia* has become universal and all-encompassing as a result of Adam's Fall. We are in a state of profound opacity and disorientation of self and desire. Moreover it is not resolvable by the human effort to understand—or by any human effort at all. We must put our faith in the Christian God, resulting in the transformation of our

desire through a Christian love informed by belief (which latter is privileged over knowledge and understanding in Augustine –another relevant and telling innovation) rather than by coming to a theoretical and cosmological knowledge of our place in nature or Creation potentially open to all who seek it qua human. The post-Fall self is unknowable as such but even as perfected by God it can no longer be said to find its *natural* place and explanation in the *cosmos*. If the Kantian ‘will’ has not yet come on the scene, we can still detect some seeds of it here.

But let us go back to the Platonic tradition of Eros to see how it is transformed by Augustine in very specific ways that eventually lead us to the Kantian formula.^{xi} For in Plato erotic passion comes to figure in philosophical thought as the motive force not only of our emotional lives but also of our intellectual and ethical ones. Both streams of thinking begin with *The Symposium* but they diverge in significant ways that are then amplified as time goes on. Plato's generally views erotic passion as the motive force of human endeavor, a force that nevertheless must be shaped, directed, educated, and transformed but never sidestepped. Thus Plato envisions the capture of the force of passion and its redirection towards the general understanding of self and world, which will then inform and motivate our worthy endeavors. Transforming passion for primitive sources of pleasure into a passionate search for understanding in the widest sense is, thus, the central problem and project of a life well lived. For an eroticized search for understanding is both intellectual and also motivational. Knowledge, not qua cognitive but qua passionately sought after and embraced, becomes our central motivating force. It is an intellectual desire, a desire that has itself been put through the rigors and the transforming powers of thought and experience.

Jonathan Lear in his essay, “What is Sex?” (in his study *Love and its Place in Nature* Yale University Press, 1998) writes about the Eros of Plato's *Symposium* as designating a passionate embrace by the self of the world. In the search for knowledge as Plato envisions it the world becomes erotic object, Lear suggests, and with that embrace of understanding we embrace the world as a place in which our desires and purposes can be fulfilled. Without that projection of passion onto the world, the world is of little interest; we remain passionately solipsist and hence barren.

This is one stream of thought that informs the Western intellectual tradition from Plato through Freud, we might say. Aristotle is squarely in this camp as his paean in *Nicomachean Ethics* X to the love

of knowledge for its own sake as the highest, most characteristic, and most deeply satisfying and fulfilling human activity makes clear. For Aristotle the motivation that is the source of all human action is desire, either a desire like that of animals or a rationalized and intellectualized one unique to humans but in either case, just as in Plato, only desire can motivate, initiating action. Ethics progresses from primitive to educated desire, a wisdom that motivates and informs our actions and shapes our lives.

We might classify even the rabbinic legend about a world temporarily deprived of the *yetzer hara'*, of the 'id', of all passion, which results in the cessation of all births and nature and human endeavor as a midrash on Plato's Eros. For cut off from its erotic sources all human striving and even action, and perhaps nature as a whole, come to a grinding halt, the rabbis conjectured. The medieval Arabic rationalist tradition of philosophy of the *fal' asifa*, both its Muslim and Jewish practitioners (for example, Alfarabi, Avicenna, Averroes, Maimonides, Crescas, and even Spinoza), continued and even radicalized this Platonic-Aristotelian tradition of the transformation of Eros via intellectual understanding, wisdom, as the source and content of the ethical. Spinoza's famous remark captures this tradition stemming from *The Symposium* perhaps best, "The endeavor to understand is the first and only basis of virtue." We might note, too, that the rabbinic notion of *'torah l'shma'* grounds the Jewish philosophical approach in a widely accepted and normative Jewish value.

This Platonic stream is one train of thought. But an alternative one culminating in and radicalized by Kant and perhaps the most dominant one today envisions action as stemming from the act of decision itself, from the will designated as free, rather than from the Platonic eroticized intellect coming to understand the world in its complexity, breadth, and depth. This second stream separates passion from scientific reason, action from theoretical understanding and discovery in a very un-Platonic way. The distance from its Platonic origins, and even its Stoic ones, is great. In this way of thinking it is *practical* reason itself that comes to decisions and acts upon them. Here we have the legacy of a tradition that separates theoretical intellect, wisdom, from Eros, and ultimately in its Kantian version, even desire from action.

I would like to suggest that Augustine transformed the Platonic legacy of Eros in five important ways: 1. He weighted belief over knowledge, transforming Platonic *pistis* into belief on authority (in this case, the authority of Christian doctrine and text), i.e., Faith. 2. Second, Augustine detached the Love that

is the consummate motivator of good action from the Platonic love of theoretical understanding and replaced it with the Love that stems from Christian Faith, from embracing authoritative Christian beliefs.

3. Third, Augustine placed *will* along with intellect, i.e., cognition (now understood principally as Belief on Authority, Faith), as the divine dimension within the human. **4. Following the Platonism of his era Augustine downgraded Nature and saw it as a coming from the divine but in a low form: it was as an earthly, material, corporealizing of the spiritual. Hence the divine aspects of the human, the will and the intellect (Faith), were understood by Augustine, as ABOVE NATURE, above the mere natural material world, the world that corporealized the spiritual (Hadot, 2006).** 5. Finally, Augustine reinterpreted Christian love via a voluntarist psychology whereby the Christian spiritual Love is contrasted with and opposed to a worldly love. Hence each person is confronted with a *choice* between the two loves that is the ethical choice, par excellence. That choice is 'free' in that there is nothing behind it that motivates it. The Grace of God also enters in but the choice is nevertheless 'free' and one for which each of us is held responsible. This Christian version of the Platonic Eros introduced by Augustine diverged further in its trajectory from the Platonic as the voluntarist sources of motivation came to be further articulated, theorized, and also emphasized over the affective sources till the latter fairly disappear in the Kantian version, the version we take as standard and even intuitive today.

It is in the second round of Christian Augustinian responses to Greek philosophy, this time occasioned by to the influx of Latin translations of Arabic 'Averroist' texts in the 12th and 13th centuries, where we discover the modern notion of the will crystallizing –this is the CCFW will, that is the Counter Causal Free Will, the will that stands above its desires, its biographical history and genetic endowments to choose somehow from among them but from a position beyond them. In the later versions the will is decoupled not only from determination by the intellect (as we saw in Augustine) but also from determination by its desires whether reformed or un-reformed. We can now see the complete transformation: Whereas the general Greek view was that it is desire that prompts us to act and that desire can (and ought to) be informed and transformed through reason and understanding (and therein, and not in a –I would say,

falsely--concretized will, lies its freedom), we now have, so to speak, *choice* that chooses. That's the will. Augustine's mid-position is that we still act from desire, from (choosing) love of one kind or the other.

The process of the systematic reinterpretation of Arabic philosophic texts and theories to introduce a separate *faculty* of will and doctrine of free will in the name of Christianizing them—reading them through an Augustinian prism--and domesticating their most dangerous or controversial aspects has been documented in fine detail by Bonnie Kent in her *Virtues of the Will: The Transformation of Ethics in the Late Thirteenth Century*. The Condemnations of 1277 by the Bishop of Paris of so called Averroist naturalism and of naturalist causal determinism merely reified the interpretive strategy that was already well underway, Bonnie Kent points out. She is now working on the earlier period, from Augustine to the 13th century and also extending her research into the fourteenth century and beyond.

Charles Kahn^{xii} has written a particularly excellent essay in which he teases out the various strands contributory to the development of a full-blown theory of free will. Kahn highlights the dichotomy between the classical account of agency and the alternative one centering on the will, by contrasting Aristotle with Aquinas, identifying for the reader the systematic differences due to the introduction and development of an Augustinian notion of will completely absent in Aristotle^{xiii}. He concludes:

If we look back now from Aquinas to Aristotle, we see that something remarkable has occurred. ... [W]here Aristotle's theory of action relies on a network of independent concepts, Aquinas presents a tightly unified account focused on a single faculty: *voluntas*, the will, which includes an essential freedom of choice.

And there is more. In Aquinas willing (*velle*) stands next to understanding as the two intrinsic operations of the soul as such, both of them being capable of being performed without any bodily organ (I.77.5). Hence these powers remain in the soul after the destruction of the body (I.77.8). Needless to say, there is nothing corresponding to this in Aristotle. ... this notion of willing as a purely spiritual, incorporeal activity points ahead to the Cartesian notion of volition as a mental event causing a bodily motion....

And of course it points back to Augustine. Cartesian dualism is thus prefigured in Thomas as is the Cartesian notion that the will induces or inhibits emotions, the passions of the soul. For Descartes even the proper method of coming to know will involve an initial act of will to follow the mind rather than the body so that intellectual error will be reduced to moral error, the moralizing of the mind—the exact inverse of the Greek philosophical reduction of moral error to ignorance! Moreover for Aquinas it is not as in the classical tradition that intellect alone is what separates God, the angels, and the human from the animal but

it is, in Augustinian fashion will as well^{xiv} –will is exercised by all three, (God, angels, and humans) in contradistinction to animal functioning, and in the three without any bodily organ (Kahn, 245).

But how did we get here? Kahn identifies four “landmarks” or contributory factors that led to the full-blown concept of will “as an essentially spiritual power exercising decisive control over our voluntary actions”: 1. the first is the Stoic theory of rational assent to perceptions that results in propositional claims. Actions presuppose in the Stoic view rational assent to claims about the world *from which necessarily* arise impulses to act in certain ways. 2. The second contributory factor is the Roman translation and cultural assimilation of Greek philosophical concepts, particularly *prohairesis* but also one or two others, into the Latin *voluntas* and its cognates which had a different set of accompanying cultural associations: some scholars cite a Roman penchant for the strong-willed character while others merely suggest a linguistic association of *voluntas* with *libera*, free, originating in a passage of Lucretius. 3. Kahn next points out that it is in “Augustine’s doctrine of the will” that “Neoplatonic and Christian levels of spirituality are added to the Stoic and Roman conceptions of *voluntas*.”

From the Neoplatonists Augustine gratefully accepted the notion of a purely intelligible, noncorporeal domain of reality, to which the human will belonged together with the intellect. From St. Paul and his own experience of conversion he derived the sense of the divided self: “I do not do the good I will [*thelO*], but I do the evil which I will not [*ou thelO*]” (Romans 7:15). It was by meditation on these words of St. Paul that Augustine developed the notion of will that Kierkegaard found lacking in Socrates:

Socrates explains that he who does not do the right thing has not understood it, but Christianity goes a little further back and says, it is because he will not understand it, and this in turn is because he does not will the right. ... So then, Christianity understood, sin lies in the will, not in the intellect; and the corruption of the will goes well beyond the consciousness of the individual.

(*Sickness unto Death*, part 2, chapter 2 in ‘*Fear and Trembling*’ and ‘*The Sickness unto Death*,’ trans. W. Lowrie, Princeton, 1974: 226).^{xv}

Kahn concludes with the claim that it all, in a deeper sense, goes back to Augustine, that the philosophic development of the concept of the freedom of the will is a footnote, so to speak, to Augustine: “The spiritual journey which Augustine reports in his *Confessions* is to a large extent his exploration of the concept of the human will and its responsibility for evil” (p. 256). [Kahn goes on to quote the following passage from the *Confessions* garden conversion scene in Milan:

My two wills, one old, one new, one carnal, one spiritual, were in conflict and between them they tore my world apart. (8.5)

To make the journey, and to arrive safely, no more was required than an act of will [*velle*]. But it must be a resolute and wholehearted act of will, not some lame wish [*voluntas*] which I kept turning over and over in my mind; ... I locked my fingers and hugged my knees; and I did all this because I made an act of will [*volui*] to do it... Yet I did not do the one thing which I should have been far better pleased to do than all the rest and could have done at once, as soon as I had the will to do it [*mox ut vellem, possem*] because as soon as I had the will to do so, I should have willed it wholeheartedly. For in this case the power to act was the same as the will [*voluntas*]. To will it was to do it. Yet I did not do it. (8.8)

Why does this occur? ... The mind orders itself to make an act of will [*imperat ut velit*], and it would not give this order unless it willed to do so; yet it does not carry out its own command. But it does not fully will to do this thing [*non ex toto vult*] and therefore does not fully give the order. ... For the will commands that an act of will should be made, and it gives this command to itself, not to some other will. The reason, then, why the command is not obeyed is that it is not given with the full will [*non plena imperat*]. ... So there are two wills in us, because neither by itself is the whole will, and each possesses what the other lacks. (8.9)]

Kahn proposes that we are in the end confronted with a theological concept, as Dihle in 1982 proposed, even if the history of the concept can now be understood in a more nuanced way as bringing together a number of cultural and linguistic strands. It is the attitude of *obedience* to the will of God that is first captured and “fully articulated by Augustine” and then “integrated into a general theory of human psychology by Aquinas”. “The architectonic structure of Aquinas’s *Summa*, where the psychological theory is presented within an account of God’s creative action,” Kahn remarks at the end of the essay, “reveals the extent to which the view of the will has remained profoundly theological,” i.e., theologically Christian.

The available alternative I would like to suggest is Spinoza’s ethics, in which we can discern the fruition of the classical standpoint as radicalized by the *fal āsifa* insofar as ethics is developed as perspectival change that transforms the motivating affects within a framework of natural causal

determinism. For Spinoza reformed desire and material, institutional, social, and political interventions are mutually constitutive insofar as Spinoza brings body and mind together in identity, an identity that is both in individual and cosmic. Spinozist embodiment refers to the individual body, to the social body insofar as our actual embeddedness both in social relations, and also to the cosmic body in all the natural processes (in the latter we're back to the Stoics). All these inform and also exhaust the constitution of the self, bursting its seemingly narrow bounds, and thereby making ethics a social and political as well as clearly natural transformation as well as an intellectual and affective one. *For Spinoza all causes are in webs of relation and systems nested within systems, the social and natural being continuous and the human deeply embedded within the larger webs, both contributing to them and expressive of them. It was medieval normative Christian philosophical theology alone that embraced the miraculous freedom of the will, the isolation of the self to enable its self-origination or self-invention, which in modernity was reinterpreted in secular guise and re-contextualized within a modern scientific and philosophical framework, principally by Descartes and Kant. The freedom of the will implies that the human person is taken out of the causal system and is not subject to normal causal explanation.* In contrast, it is the corruption of the mind by its social embeddedness driving its desires that constitutes, for Spinoza, his modernized version of the Greek *akrasia*, an alternative to the Augustinian post-Fall unruly will. Hence the ethical resolution must be both personal and political, involving the transformation of our understanding but also of our embedding institutions, our social and natural situations, as both cause and effect of affective change the principle of which is to expose our rootedness in, our real constitution by, wider causal networks and systems than we had realized and our conscious reform of our self-understanding and reforming of our institutions in that new light. Ethics as the reform of desire and the broadening of our social and natural embeddedness and embodiedness suggest that in Spinoza we have a real alternative to a Kantian ethics in which the emotions fall out of ethics and the individual will itself, as initiator without recourse to emotions and context as motivating, stands alone in stark self-reflection and self-valuation. With Spinoza we are instead back in the world of Plato's Eros now extended to encompass the social and natural embodiments that shape our desires, flinging them outward toward erotic attachments to wider universes in which we now discern within webs within webs of connection our own reflection.

ⁱ Cambridge University Press, 1995: p. xi. I am grateful to Professor John McCumber of UCLA for pointing out this passage to me.

ⁱⁱ Emphasis in text.

ⁱⁱⁱ Emphasis added.

^{iv} Emphasis in text.

^v Pierre Courcelle, “Anti-Christian Arguments and Christian Platonism: from Arnobius to St. Ambrose” in *The Conflict Between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century: Essays*. Ed. by Arnaldo Momigliano (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1963: chapter VII, pp. 151 – 191): 165.

^{vi} A. Hilary Armstrong writes particularly poignantly that in the Christian “rejection of the [Platonic and Platonist] cosmic religion something important was in danger of being completely lost, and an opportunity was, in the 4th and 5th centuries, missed. What was in danger of being lost was the sense of the holiness, the religious relevance of the cosmos as a whole, and with it, inevitably the sense of the holiness of ordinary life and bodily activities” in *St. Augustine and the Augustinian Tradition*, The Saint Augustine Lecture: 1966, The Saint Augustine Lecture Series, Villanova University, Robert P. Russell, O.S.A., Editor ad Benedict A. Paparella, Ph.D., Associate Editor, Villanova, PA: Villanova University Press, 1967, p. 17.

^{vii} In *Augustinian Studies*, Vol. 3, 1972: 35 – 59

^{viii} Armstrong, “Neoplatonic Valuations,” p. 49.

^{ix} Instead the direct relation to God is what links divine and human according to the precise Christian history of the divine-human relation, both salvation history and personal history. In this respect, Augustine, stands in contrast with the later Jewish and Islamic philosophers who in many respects carried on the tenor and to a large extent the details of the pagan philosophic tradition. For he took Christian salvation history seriously and literally or at face value whereas the counter tradition in large part philosophized it away. Why the latter did so is a matter of speculation. The inadvertent misallocation of a Plotinian text to Aristotle is part of the story and, according to Muhsin Mahdi, another piece of the puzzle is Alfarabi’s affinity to Aristotle over Plato, despite his tutelage under Christian Platonists, in his effort to initiate the revival of Greek philosophy in the Islamic world. See Muhsin S. Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001). We do not need to take a position on Mahdi’s Straussian claim that Platonism was Farabi’s popular religious rhetoric and his Aristotelianism his serious philosophy.

^x *St. Augustine and the Augustinian Tradition*, e.g., p. 25

^{xi} Kant is also influenced by a theory of autonomy as self-legislation –which has a separate but somewhat different Christian history. See Schneewind’s essay (see below).

^{xii} Charles H. Kahn, “Discovering the Will: From Aristotle to Augustine” in *The Question of “Eclecticism”: Studies in Later Greek Philosophy*, ed. by John Dillon and A. A. Long, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 234- 259.

^{xiii} Aristotle’s theory of choice *prohairesis*—rational deliberate desire for the means-- and *boulesis*—desire for the end- involves only rational desire and a notion of the voluntary as internal in contrast to external coercion, according to Kahn (pp. 239 –241).

^{xiv} Walzer points out (p. 293) that Porphyry had a notion of the human perfection qua divine as resulting from the intellect and qua human from voluntary actions. Perhaps we have here a precursor to what will become in Christian reworking an independent faculty of will. Certainly this account is consistent with an Aristotelian understanding of the human person.

^{xv} Kahn, pp. 255- 256