Voluntarism and the Self in Medieval Literature

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ABSTRACT

The voluntarist movement in later medieval philosophy accentuates the role of the will in human agency. A robust account of human freedom is tied to the indeterminacy of the will, and our character as moral agents is articulated in terms of the will's free choices. These philosophical developments are often said to manifest themselves in various works of fourteenth-century English literature. Here I explore what exactly voluntarism is and how it appears in the work of Geoffrey Chaucer and William Langland.

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Introduction

It is often suspected, of various works of fourteenth-century English literature, that they show the influence of philosophical voluntarism in the heightened significance they give to the will and its affective operations. This is a tempting thought to have with regard to Geoffrey Chaucer, who was dubbed by a contemporary "the noble philosophical poet" (Windeatt, 2023, pp. 379-380). It is an even more tempting thought to have with regard to *Piers Plowman*, both because of William Langland's explicit engagement with

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philosophy and theology, and because of Langland's choice to make Will his central character.

An obstacle to such claims, however, is that no one has ever produced a clear and systematic account of what the voluntarist movement was. I hope to do that in detail elsewhere, but here I will attempt something more modest: to distinguish between a few claims that might be associated with voluntarism, and to consider some signs of their presence within Chaucer and Langland*.* A clear understanding of the philosophical character of voluntarism, and its implications for human nature, makes for a compelling case that we should understand these poets as imbuing various abstract philosophical thesis about the primacy of will with concrete meaning, set within the context of ordinary life.

Some Varieties of Voluntarism

A rough start at delimiting the scope of voluntarism might distinguish between claims made about the human will, claims made about the divine will, and claims made about the popular will. The last of these three concerns the grounds of political authority, and voluntarism is sometimes associated with fourteenth-century political theorists who stress the role of popular consent in establishing political legitimacy. Here the leading figures are Marsilius of Padua and William of Ockham.[^1] The second of these three broad categories concerns various ways in which God's will might impinge upon human affairs. Of course, the presence of God in our daily lives is taken for granted throughout the Middle Ages. But views that put great weight on the radical freedom of God's will are often associated with voluntarism. An interesting feature of these views is that they are prone to have destabilizing implications, calling into question our ability to understand the world around us and our place within it. A well-known example of this sort is the claim of John Duns Scotus (1265/6-1308) that most of the laws of the Decalogue obtain only contingently-that God could have made it the case, for instance, that theft is not wrong (Scotus, 2017, pp. 248-258).

Here I will set aside these two broad categories and focus on the first and most prominent form of voluntarism, concerning the human will. It would be very difficult to give an exhaustive account of the many distinct forms of voluntarism that might be identified here, but some rough distinctions can be drawn. First, and most generally, voluntarists are united by their opposition to any form of causal determinism of the will,

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of the sort found within Stoicism and Arabic Aristotelianism, according to which our choices are necessitated by the course of past events (Bobzien, 2001; Belo, 2007). Closely tied to this philosophical thesis is a theological thesis, that God's providence necessitates all of our choices. This kind of necessity is explicitly found among some medieval authors, most prominently in Thomas Bradwardine, who argues that everything that happens, including every act of every human will, is necessitated by God's eternal volition (Bradwardine,1618).[^2] On its face, this seems incompatible with human freedom and moral responsibility, and so a characteristic challenge faced by many voluntarists is to find a way of squaring God's eternal foreknowledge and providence with robust human freedom (Normore, 1982). These issues interact with a third aspect of voluntarism, which is its sympathy for something in the vicinity of Pelagianism with respect to the doctrine of grace. Although it is settled doctrine that grace is both required for salvation and freely given by God, voluntarists tend to be broadly sympathetic to the idea that human beings have some capacity to do the good independently of receiving grace (Oberman, 1962).

The voluntarists sought to make headway on these large theological questions by offering a transformed conception of human nature, one on which the will supplants intellect as the defining feature of our nature. We can understand this transformation as coming in four stages. The first stage, which I will call *anti-intellectualism*, argues against yet another sort of determinism: the will's being determined in its choices by the judgment of intellect. On views of this sort, which were widely held by scholastic authors, the will must choose that which the intellect judges to be the best course of action. Resistance to this sort of determinism takes various forms, as we will see, and is perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of medieval voluntarism. A second stage, building on the first, undermines the ancient consensus that all of our voluntary choices are made for the sake of happiness. According to some voluntarists, the will is free to choose for or against its own happiness. Moreover, according to these authors, it is essential both to our freedom and to our moral worth that we do choose against happiness, and instead we choose to embrace justice. This leads directly to a third sort of commitment, one that is less familiar but yet critical to an appreciation of voluntarism's broader cultural influence. This is the idea of the will as the primary locus of *selfhood*, which is to say that who we are as individuals is defined, first and foremost, by the character of our wills. This is an idea that goes back, as we will see, to the origins of Christianity, but it takes on new prominence in the fourteenth century. And that idea in turn leads to a fourth member of this set, which is that the will is the

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primary locus of *moral worth*, in the sense that our being virtuous or vicious, praiseworthy or blameworthy, depends on the internal state of our will rather than on what we do in the world.

To understand the lines that run between the four forms of voluntarism just described we might start with the most well-known version of intellectualism, that of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). Aquinas's contemporary critics, of whom there were many, often depicted his views in crude caricature, as if the will were simply a rubber stamp endorsing the judgments of intellect. In fact he offers a very complex and nuanced account of the relation between will and intellect, and scholars continue to dispute the extent to which it can aptly be regarded as intellectualist rather than voluntarist.[^3] But it is clear at a minimum that Aquinas believes the will has a determinate teleological orientation toward the good: in other words, that all its choices are made under the guise of the good:

> "The will naturally tends towards its ultimate end: for every human being naturally wills happiness. And this natural willing is the cause of all other willings, since whatever a human being wills, he wills for the sake of an end." (Aquinas, 1950-53, 1a 60.2c).

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

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and tends to be overshadowed in Aquinas's thinking by the role of intellect in determining which courses of action will best promote our own happiness.

To avoid falling into crude caricature, it should be said that Aquinas's position becomes quickly more complex when one considers the story's temporal dimension. For although the will must follow the ultimate judgment of intellect, it is not just the passive recipient of the intellect's dictates. Instead, the lines of causal influence run in both directions. For what may seem best is for the intellect to continue deliberating, or to deliberate about something different, and it is the will that issues such commands. This does not ultimately mean that the will is in charge, however, because the will's command is itself a product of a prior intellectual judgment, which may itself be the product of a voluntary choice to deliberate. The process runs back and forth, over the entire course of an agent's life. Moreover, over the course of a life, both will and intellect acquire various dispositions-virtues and vices-and these shape the ways in which the two faculties behave. Inasmuch as two of the most important moral virtues, justice and charity, are virtues of the will (Aquinas, 1950-53, 1a2ae 56.6), it can hardly be said that the will plays a secondary role in Aquinas's thinking. But even if that makes it somewhat misleading to characterize his ultimate position as intellectualist, it is certainly not the case that his account of human nature *privileges* the will as opposed to intellect. And what's distinctive of the voluntarist movement is precisely that it does in various ways privilege the will over and above other aspects of human nature.

We can see this sort of privilege at work very clearly in Scotus's rejection of a view along the lines of Aquinas's. Against the idea that everything we choose is connected to our own happiness, Scotus distinguishes between two innate inclinations within our will, one for our own advantage and another for justice: "The innate affection for justice is our inborn freedom, in virtue of which one can will something good that is not ordered to oneself." (Scotus, 1950-2013, n.110) . As Scotus here indicates, it is this "affection for justice" that makes us free, securing us the ability to will or not-will anything whatsoever, no matter how directly tied it is to our own happiness. And so Scotus claims in general that "when it comes to any object, I do not necessarily choose either to will or to will-against." (Scotus, 1639, XI.2:913a; tr. Williams, 2023, p.36). A generation later, William of Ockham (1287-1347) goes even further. Whereas Aquinas holds that the will's teleological orientation toward its ultimate end is, as it were, hard-wired, Ockham flatly denies this, writing that "the will is not naturally inclined to its ultimate end" (Scotus, 1967--89, I:507).[^4] The implication of this claim is that although happiness in heaven with God is our ultimate end, the will has the capacity to

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reject that end, which is a claim that Ockham explicitly endorses, remarking elsewhere that "even with the intellect's judging that this is the ultimate end, the will can will-against that end" (Scotus, 1967--1989, VII:350). In effect, the will can will to be unhappy. This in turn has ramifications for everything that the will chooses, because if it can reject its ultimate end then it can reject *anything* that the intellect might propose, given that the intellect's practical judgments have force only on the assumption that the agent desires a certain end. This, too, is something that Ockham explicitly avows, saying that "the will can be moved against the judgment of reason." (Scotus, 1967-1989, VII:354, VII:357-58).

We might say that, for both Scotus and Ockham, the will is a much more interesting faculty than it is for Aquinas. Although Aquinas's will plays an ineliminable causal role in his theory of action, and serves as the subject for the most important moral virtues, its role is limited by its natural inclination for happiness in a way that the will for Scotus and Ockham is not. Whether or not this gives their wills greater *freedom* is a question that has been long debated and need not be taken up here. But their anti-intellectualism plainly gives the will itself a more important role to play in human action, by making the will's autonomous choice the critical deciding factor. The point has to be articulated with some care. The point has to be articulated with some care. After all, even for the most intellectualist of scholastic authors, it is the endorsement of will (*voluntas*) that defines the scope of *voluntary action*, and hence the scope of moral responsibility[^5]. What's different for voluntarists like Scotus Ockham is that the explanation for why the will chooses one thing or another rests ultimately with the will itself. The will's choices are, to be sure, influenced by the judgment of intellect and by the various virtues and vices we accumulate over time. Moreover, the voluntarists agree that the will *ought* to follow reason, assuming that it is right reason, and *ought* to act in accord with our moral dispositions, assuming they are *virtuous* dispositions. But whereas Aquinas (1954, I.16) can write that "it is by virtue that we live well.", the voluntarists treat the will as the decisive locus of our agency where our status as moral agents is ultimately determined.

Determinism in Troilus and Criseyde

To begin to consider these philosophical problems in a wider social context we might first look at Chaucer's (1987) epic mid-career poem, *Troilus and Criseyde*. The story is

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based upon Boccaccio's version of a tragic love affair set in ancient Troy, but Chaucer adds to this source material a complex philosophical frame. He wrote the poem in the 1380s, not long after making a carefully literal English translation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. Although utterly different in their narrative setting-the one features an aging philosopher sentenced to death, the other a young lovestruck warrior-the two works share a similar thematic focus: the pursuit of happiness, the vicissitudes of fortune, and the seeming inevitability of divine destiny.

The essential plotline of *Troilus and Criseyde* can be conveyed quickly. Troilus, the king's son, falls in love with Criseyde and, with the help of his friend Pandarus, after much unhappy suffering, manages to begin a love affair with her. They are happy until Criseyde is forced to leave Troy as part of a prisoner exchange with the Greeks. She promises to return but she does not, instead giving her love to the Greek warrior Diomede. Troilus, miserable once again, soon dies in battle.

From the poem's terse opening lines Chaucer makes clear that what fundamentally drives the action is the quest for happiness, and in particular Troilus's progress "Fro wo to wele [wellbeing], and after out of joie" (I.3)[^6]. Having described the woe of unrequited love in the first two books, the proem to Book III then announces its need to "tell anonright the gladnesse / Of Troilus ... / To which gladnesse, who nede hath, God hym brynge" (III.47--49). The start of Book V then describes Troilus's state of mind at the pivotal moment when he must escort Criseyde from Troy to the Greek camp:

> "This Troilus, withouten reed or loore, *without plan or direction*
>
> As man that hath his joies ek forlore,
>
> Was waytyng on his lady evere more
>
> As she that was the sothfast crop and more *the true leaf and root*
>
> Of al his lust or joies heretofore.
>
> But Troilus, now far-wel al thi joie,
>
> For shaltow nevere sen hire eft in Troie!" (V.22--28)

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Chaucer uses "joy" three times here to stress what it is that Troilus is losing, and at the same time he intensifies the poem's A-B-A-B-B-C-C rhyming scheme so as to heighten the significance of the moment: A-A-A-A-A, and then B-B: Troilus will never be happy again.

The poem takes for granted the philosophers' consensus that everyone seeks happiness. What the poem presses us to consider is just what such happiness consists in. In the passage just quoted, we are told that Troilus had fixated on Criseyde as the ultimate end of all his desires: she was "crop and more [root] of all his lust or joies." Up until the very end of the poem his single-minded focus gets taken for granted as just the sort of thing one should expect a noble young warrior to do, and our hero's successes in this domain are uncritically described as bringing him the most perfect sort of happiness. The narrator, indeed, struggles throughout Book III to convey the extent of their happiness:

> "Of hire delit or joies oon the leeste *hire : their* | *oon : any of*
>
> Were impossible to my wit to seye; (III.1310--11)
>
> And lat hem in this heavene blisse dwell *him : them*
>
> That is so heigh that al ne kan I tell." (III.1322--23)

These are reports only of their first night together. With subsequent meetings their happiness increases exponentially: "For if it erst was wel, tho [then] was it bet /A thousand fold; ... / Ago [gone] was every sorwe and every feere" (III.1683-85).

If we take the narrator at their word, our heroes achieve at this midpoint of the poem the very summit of happiness (Windeatt, 2023, pp.195--201). But part of what makes the poem so challenging to interpret is that the narrator's word clearly is not to be taken at face value. Theirs is, indeed, the most unsophisticated voice in the entire poem, consistingly offering a naïve construal of the events taking place. From the perspective of Boethius or of any philosophical tradition, joy of the sort that the narrator finds so transcendent should not be the ultimate end of any human life. And lest one thinks that the narrator might be tacitly distinguishing between joy and true happiness, we are

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explicitly told that what Troilus and Criseyde have is better than the "felicite" of the philosophers:

> "Felicite, which that thise clerkes wise *clerkes : scholars*
>
> Comenden so, ne may nought here suffise;
>
> This joie may nought writen be with inke;
>
> This passeth al that herte may bythynke." (III.1691--94)

Chaucer has a wide repertoire of words that he can use to talk with some nuance about the different kinds of happiness: he tends to use 'bliss' and 'glad' and 'joy' for immediate feelings of pleasure, and can use 'felicite' and 'selynesse' for the all-encompassing well-being of a good life[^7]. Such a distinction between momentary pleasure and overall happiness lies at the very core of the *Consolation of Philosophy* and premodern ethics more generally. But the narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde* has no use for such niceties. The worry that the poem's heroes might be pursuing the wrong sort of happiness is quite alien to the narrator's frame of reference.

Closely linked to the what-is-it question of happiness lies the question of why happiness is so fleeting in this life. This *is* a concern the narrator takes seriously, and which they frame in terms of the vicissitudes of fortune. At a crucial moment in Pandarus's scheme to get Troilus into bed with Criseyde the narrator gestures toward its power:

> "But O Fortune, executrice of wierdes, *wierdes : fate*
>
> O influences of thise hevenes hye!
>
> Soth is, that under God ye ben oure hierdes *hierdes : shepherds*
>
> Though to us bestes ben the causez wrie." (III.617-20) *wry : concealed*

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The narrative abounds with other such references to fortune, often personified as a goddess. The characters themselves likewise dwell on the role of fortune, but display markedly different attitudes. Troilus's attitude, from the start, is one of despair. Even before he has made any effort to pursue a relationship with Criseyde he is convinced that "Fortune is my foe" (I.837), and when he receives the devastating news that Criseyde is to be sent to the Greeks he devotes an eleven-stanza apostrophe to Fortune and the various other forces oppressing him, calling on Fortune to kill him rather than continue to torment him (IV.260--336). Confronted with the same events, other characters react quite differently. Pandarus's advice to both Troilus and Criseyde is to take advantage of fortune as best they can: the trick is to be ready when the wheel of fortune turns in their direction. Criseyde's attitude is more complex. Chaucer ascribes to her a dense 24-line argument, closely paraphrasing a passage from the *Consolation of Philosophy*, which draws on the inevitably transitory character of earthly pleasure to conclude that "ther is no verray weele [true wellbeing] in this world heere" (III.836)[^8]. Whereas Pandarus wants the lovers to play to win the game of fortune, and Troilus despairs of winning even from the start, Criseyde sees no path other than to make the best of things. In her final private conversation with Troilus, as she brings to its conclusion her elaborate case for why Troilus should let her go to the Greeks and await her return, she urges Troilus to take control over fortune by embracing the virtue of patience:

> "Thus maketh vertu of necessite
>
> By pacience, and thynk that lord is he
>
> Of Fortune ay that naught wole of hire recche, *who will always think nothing of her*
>
> And she ne daunteth no wight but a wretch." (IV.1586--89) *wight : person*

To become "lord of fortune" is precisely to take the sort of control over fortune that is the hallmark of a free agent-the lordship described in Latin as *dominium*. And Criseyde's advice to Troilus is quite apt, inasmuch as the standard medieval understanding of patience is that it is the disposition to react to adversity through reason rather than

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despair[^9]. For Troilus, who spends much of the poem moaning in his bed, this is excellent advice.

But although Criseyde consistently displays at least as much insight as any other character-so much so that Chaucer gives her a speech taken straight from Boethius-her position on fortune is not in fact *Boethius's* position. Criseyde is reciting what Boethius's character in the *Consolation* thinks about fortune in the early stages of the poem, but this reflects only the prisoner's confused state of mind, precisely the condition that Lady Philosophy has descended to straighten out. Philosophy insists on a point that none of the pagan characters in *Troilus* clearly recognize: that what we call fortune is not random happenstance but instead God's deliberate and rational plan. In the words of Chaucer's translation, "the governance of the werld ... nis nat subgit ne underput to the folye of thise happes aventurous, but to the resoun of God." (Chaucer, 1987, *Consolation* Ipr6, lines 89--92). The point is not to deny that there is such a thing as fortune, but instead to understand it as an epistemic category: we regard events as due to fortune when our efforts toward a certain end are influenced by a sequence of causes we are not expecting[^10]. Chaucer himself traces this same sort of progression of ideas in his short poem "Fortune," which begins by describing fortune as "Withouten ordre or wys discrecioun" (line 3) and then defiantly vows to defy it along the lines that Criseyde urges for Troilus: by securing a "maystrye" and "suffisaunce" over himself (lines 14-15). Ultimately, though, the poem arrives at a Boethian perspective on the nature of fortune: "th'execucion of the [divine] majestee ... That same thing "Fortune" clepen ye" (lines 65, 67). When fortune is understood in this way it becomes possible to be more than merely patient with respect to the turning wheel of fortune, and instead to embrace fortune in all of its variation. From this vantage point, as Lady Philosophy puts it, "all fortune is good" (Chaucer, 1987, IVpr7).

This higher perspective affords one of the great consolations of philosophy, but it is a consolation that no one in *Troilus* is in a position to grasp. Although the narrator does acknowledge in passing, toward the end of the poem, that fortune arises through divine providence (V.1541-44), there is no accompanying insight into the implications of this remark. When Criseyde, as above, counsels Troilus to think nothing of fortune, or when, more dimly, the narrator remarks that "In ech estat is litel hertes reste; God leve [grant] us for to take it for the beste!" (V.1749-50), the characters seek a consolation that they do not have the intellectual resources to achieve. Their pagan, inchoate philosphical musings leave them confused about the relationship between happiness, fortune, and God, and this ensures that none of them are able to flourish in their present lives.

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Criseyde is not wrong when she runs through the Boethian reasoning for the conclusion that "ther is no verray weele in this world heere" (as above), but she has only part of the story. She suffers from an old conflation rooted in language itself, according which to to be happy just is to be fortunate. In Middle English, for instance, although 'selynesse' serves as an abstract noun for the philosophers' idea of happines, to be 'sely' can mean not just happy but also lucky or blessed (among many other things). As for 'happiness' itself, that abstract noun never appears in Chaucer, while 'hap' and 'happy' always refer to fortune and good luck[^11]. Language here reflects the common assumption that happiness and fortune are inextricably entangled. To achieve a genuinely Boethian perspective on these matters requires that they be untangled.

Just as there is no voice in the poem capable of distinguishing between happiness and fortune, so there is no one who understands the relationship between fortune and destiny. This is so even though the whole poem is soaked in the language of fate. The narrator regularly treats everything that happens as foredestined, and crucial plot developments turn on Calchas-Criseyde's father-being supposedly able to foresee the future[^12]. Criseyde herself blames her situation on the "corsed constellacioun" in which she was born (IV.745). And Troilus in particular regards the whole situation as predetermined: "thow most loven thorugh thi destine" (I.520) he tells himself right from the start of his obsession with Criseyde. When it begins to seem clear that fortune is against him, "he was so fallen in despeir" as to conclude that "al that comth, comth by necessitee: Thus to ben lorn [forelorn], it is my destinee" (IV.954, 958--59). There follows a remarkably dense and intrusive philosophical discussion of divine foreknowledge, running for over 100 lines and closely paraphrasing the argumentative core of the prisoner's case in the *Consolation* for why God's foreknowledge entails necessity[^13]. In the context of the *Consolation* this serves as just another mark of the prisoner's intellectual confusion, the last of a sequence that includes the speech Chaucer had given to Criseyde in Book III. The argument itself is not particularly remarkable-Boethius has Lady Philosophy describe it as an "olde questioun" (Vpr4)-but what makes the *Consolation* a remarkable work of philosophy is the reply to this argument that Lady Philosophy makes over the work's final chapters. In the context of Chaucer's poem what makes Troilus's speech remarkable is that his cry for help meets with no response and so serves only to reinforce the poem's pervasive fatalism. Chaucer, our "noble philosophical poet", seems to insert 100 lines of Boethius into his poem only to make a case for the old and familiar heresy that "al that comth, comth by necessitee" (as above) [^14].

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What are we to make of all this? Perhaps the first thing to say is that the poem is, in a wonderful way, open with respect to these sorts of philosophical questions, bringing them into salience without decisively settling them[^15]. A related observation is that the poem invites two kinds of readings, internal and external. By an internal reading I mean one that situates itself within the perspective of the narrator and characters, entering into their values and worldviews. But even while the rich complexities of the poem draw the reader into such a perspective, Chaucer at the same time works to pull the reader back. Explicitly, he does so through a complex sequence of concluding stanzas that, as we will see, introduce various external sensibilities into the story. Implicitly, he does so by invoking fragments of Boethian ideas, thereby inviting the reader to complete the characters' inchoate philosophical thoughts.

From an internal perspective, the poem is most naturally read as embracing a hard determinism that leaves no room for freedom. If, on the other hand, one takes into account the larger Boethian context, then the characters' fatalistic outlook looks intellectually incomplete. Boethius has Lady Philosophy tell us that all rational beings have freedom of choice, in virtue of their ability to judge what ought to be done and to convert those judgments into desire and action. And we might then notice that Chaucer puts considerable weight on the rational deliberations of his characters. They are not simply responding in brute fashion to their various desires but working through, in painstaking detail, what would be most rational to do given their complex situations[^16]. So even if they do not perceive themselves to be free, one does not have to step very far outside a strictly internal reading of the poem to find reasons why we should regard them as possessed of freewill. Does this mean that these characters have the undetermined sort of freedom that is characteristic of voluntarism? In this respect the most marked influence of voluntarism is not on Chaucer himself but on his modern readers, who have been so influenced themselves by the long legacy of voluntarism that they simply assume a free choice cannot be causally necessitated[^17]. Whether or not Chaucer held that view is an open question, but if we read into the poem a Boethian worldview then the poem's sensibilities would be better described as compatibilist: its protagonists are free even though their decisions are determined by the causal forces that run through all of nature. On Boethius's intellectualist approach we are free just because of our capacity for efficacious practical reasoning-that is, because our the causal sequence that culminates in our action runs *through us* in the right sort of way.

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Troilus and Criseyde engages with voluntarism more directly when it raises questions about the motives of its characters. One of the central questions of Book IV is whether Troilus should follow his reason or his will. That theme is announced near the start:

> "Love hym made al prest to don hire byde, *prest : ready*
>
> And rather dyen than she [Criseyde] sholde go;
>
> But Resoun seyde hym, on that other syde,
>
> "Withouten assent of hire ne do nat so,
>
> Lest for thi werk she wolde be thy fo... .". (IV.162-6)

This struggle within Troilus between love and reason continues over many stanzes. He reiterates that "Thus am I with desir and reson twight [pulled]" (IV.572). Meanwhile, Pandarus pulls in the direction of his desires, "Devyne [deliberate] nat in resoun ay so depe" (IV.589), whereas Criseyde urges him to "sle [slay] with resoun al this hete [heat]" (IV.1583) and admires "that youre resoun bridlede youre delit" (IV.1678). The voluntarists, like all their contemporaries, think that our desires should be subject to right reason. But part of what makes Troilus's inner state in Book IV so interesting is that it is not clear what he ought to do, because it is not clear whether *rightness* in his situation lies with his reason or with his desires. Rightness, in the practical domain, is a matter of which course of action can be rationally expected to achieve the agent's end. And that in turn brings us back to the poem's ultimate concern: what *is* the final end at which the characters should be aiming? In the medieval context, this is to ask about the nature of happiness, a topic that, as we have seen, lies at the core of the debate over voluntarism.

A strictly internal reading of the poem yields the material for a rich discussion of the characters' pursuit of happiness. Do Troilus's moral virtues-most notably his bravery and his justice toward Criseyde-appropriately guide his pursuit of Criseyde's love? Do his apparent spiritual vices-his despair, his *acedia*-doom that pursuit?[^18] Are these to be understood as failings specifically of his will, even while his reason continues to churn out arguments on all sides? Similarly interesting questions arise for Criseyde. At the

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pivotal moment in Book V where her deliberations about whether to return to Troy come to a head, she remarks that "Felicity clepe I my suffisance" (V.756)-that is, happiness is enough for her. Is this precisely why she betrays Troilus: that she pursues happiness when she should instead be bound by considerations of justice toward him? And what of her apparent lack of the cardinal virtues: are these failings on the part of her will?[^19] Whereas Troilus is afflicted with a despair over his supposed *predestiny*, Criseyde becomes increasingly preoccupied with her future destiny:

> "Allas, of me, unto the worldes ende,
>
> Shal neyther ben ywriten nor ysonge
>
> No good word...". (V.1058--60)

This forward-looking concern has respectable credentials in the Aristotelian idea that happiness is hostage to the legacy one leaves behind after one's death[^20]. But to the voluntarists these sorts of vain preoccupations might seem to exemplify why happiness should not be our ultimate end.

On an internal reading, the poem leaves such questions open. For the reader who takes an external perspective, however, questions such as these may quickly be settled or even cease to be meaningful questions. Consider, for instance, that when Boethius has Lady Philosophy assure the prisoner that there is freewill, she immediately goes on to add that not all human freedom is equal. On Chaucer's translation, those are least free who "cast awey hir eyghen fro the lyght of the sovereyn sothfastnesse to lowe thingis and derke." (Chaucer, 1987, Vpr2). This downward turn, to things low and dark, might be thought to describe precisely what happens from the moment when Troilus first casts his eyes on Criseyde. And this reading is encouraged by a series of stanzas, affixed to the end of the poem, which introduce a Christian sensibility, counseling readers to turn their love to Christ: "And syn he best to love is, and most meke, What nedeth feynede [untrue] loves for to seke?" (V.1848-49). Read in light of these passages, the love story we have been told may seem to rest on a fundamental mistake about what really matters in life. If what we should ultimately do is set aside our untrue earthly loves for the love of Christ then why should we care about the subtle psychological details of Troilus's

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love and Criseyde's betrayal? From the start the whole story looks to be misguided, leaf and root.

In effect, to read the poem from this moralizing Christian perspective is to cancel it. To be sure, it is a perspective not easily dismissed, both in light of the stanzas that conclude the poem and given that Chaucer himself, in the retractation that concludes the *Canterbury Tales*, does specifically issue such a cancellation when he claims to "revoke ... the book of Troilus" (X.1084-85)[^21]. Even so, to take this perspective seriously is to undermine the poem itself. For by calling into question the ultimate ends of every character, the moralizing Christian reading drains the poem of all living force, uprooting the complex social and psychological tale that Chaucer has taken such pains to construct. Although *Troilus and Criseyde* can flourish within a deterministic framework, it cannot survive losing the ultimate motives from which all of the characters' actions spring.

One can however, acknowledge the external Christian-Boethian context of the poem without depriving it of all life. One way to do this-there are no doubt others-is to provide the poem a philosophical framework that acknowledges God as the ultimate end without rejecting the sort of earthly love that Troilus and Criseyde exemplify. There is nothing remotely incoherent about such a position. To treat God as our ultimate end-to love God with all our heart and soul- does not preclude loving other things as well. Rather than cancel their love affair, this playful philosophical reading of the poem embraces a *both*-and attitude: love God with all your heart and love Criseyde too. There are signs of this world-embracing attitude within the *Consolation of Philosophy*, for instance in Lady Philosophy's recitation of Fortune's perspective:

> "I pleye continuely. I torne the whirlynge wheel with the turnynge sercle; I am glad to chaungen the loweste to the heyeste, and the heyeste to the loweste. Worth up [ascend] yif thow wolt, so it be by this lawe, that thow ne holde nat that I do the wroong, though thow descende adown whan the resoun of my pley axeth it." (Consol., IIpr2)[^22].

Rise up on the wheel of fortune if you want! On this approach to the poem, there is nothing wrong with playing at earthly, carnal love, so long as one understands that it

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will not last, and that its failing to last is all part of the divine plan. The tragedy of the poem is that neither Troilus nor Criseyde is able to grasp that higher perspective. Troilus invests too much into his fleeting love, making Criseyde into "the sothfast crop and more /Of al his lust or joies heretofore" (V.25-26, as above). Criseyde's love is more flexible but leaves her similarly hostage to fortune.

The poem hints at the availability of this playful reading with just a single carefully chosen word. It comes at the end of the poem when we are told that Troilus, after his death, ascends to the "eighth sphere"-the farthest reach of the heavens, where a god might conventionally be thought to dwell. The poem is careful to add that Troilus does not stay there long. But before he is assigned to his permanent resting place, Chaucer gives him a moment of insight into the Boethian perspective on eternity, furnishing him a clear view ("ful avysement") of the cosmos and all that happens within it. What, at this crucial insight of moment, does Troilus discover? First he

> "... fully gan despise *gan : began to*
>
> This wrecched world, and held al vanite
>
> To respect of the pleyn felicite
>
> That is in hevene above...". (V.1816--19).

"Despise", to modern ears, sounds exactly in tune with the moralizing reading, but the core sense of the term in Middle English is weaker: it means simply to look down on, to have a low opinion of. This is consistent with the playful Christian reading: one should should put a low value on fleeting earthly pleasures, and recognize them as "al vanite" in comparison to the complete happiness of the life to come. But still one may play. And so it is, crucially, that what Troilus does at this point is to *laugh*: "And in hymself he lough right at the wo / Of hem that wepten for his deth so faste" (V.1821-22). On the moralizing reading this laughter will be a contemptuous sneer. But it is possible to understand it instead as a playful smile, matching the laughter of Fortune that began Book IV. Let them enjoy their time on the wheel if they can, we can suppose the raptured Troilus to be thinking to himself-the type not so much of a scolding St. Paul and more of a laughing Zarathustra.

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Whereas the moralizing Christian reading closes down the open spaces of *Troilus and Criseyde*, the poem itself takes account of how literary works refuse to stay within the spaces their readers allow. "Go litel bok" Chaucer urges his poem at the end (V.1786), reflecting on his own mortality and worrying for his future reputation in just the way Criseyde had. Don't "myswrite" or "mysmetre" my poem (V.1795-96). He then charges his friends, "moral Gower" and "philosophical Strode", to "correcte" the poem where necesssary (V.1856-58)-not, I take it, by way of fixing misspellings but by ensuring that it be received in ways that are morally and philosophically appropriate. The real risk in putting literature into the world is the risk of misinterpretation. And this is a risk because if voluntarism holds true anywhere it holds for the interpretive choices of readers. Gower and Strode are now long dead, but the task of looking after Chaucer's little book remains.

The Will as Locus of the Self

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

This is not an idea that could have taken hold in classical antiquity, given that the concept of the will arguably does not even exist in antiquity, and certainly does not exist in anything like a voluntaristic form[^23]. But we can find associations between the will and the self in early Christian authors, even as early as St. Paul. Consider this famous passage from his Letter to the Romans:

> "For that which I do, I do not understand. For I do not do the good that I will (θέλω; *volo*), but the evil that I hate, that I do. If then I do that which I will against, I consent to the law, that it is good. *So then it is not I who do it*, but the sin that dwells within me. For I know that the good does not dwell within me, that is, within my flesh. For to will the good is present to me, but to achieve the good, that I do not find. For I do not do the good that I will,

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> but the evil that I will against, this I do. *But if I do that which I will against, then it is not I who do it*, but the sin that dwells within me. Therefore I find a law, that while I am willing to do good, evil is present to me. For, with respect to the interior person, I am delighted with the law of God. But I see another law in my limbs, fighting against the law of my mind and imprisoning me in the law of sin that is in my limbs"[^24].

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

From a philosophical point of view, this famous text is quite perplexing[^25]. At first glance, it might seem to subscribe to the sort of Platonic or Cartesian dualism that identifies the self with the soul, and so consequently treats the body as something outside of the self. But whether or not Paul might accept such a thesis, he is not strictly committed to it here. Instead, he wishes only to disassociate certain actions from himself: those actions that he has not willed. When we focus on this claim, the obvious question becomes what sort of actions he is referring to. The answer that immediately suggests itself is that Paul is describing what philosophers today call weakness of will, where, roughly, we know that it would be best to do one thing, and yet we find ourselves doing something else (Davidson, 1980). Yet, on reflection, this is extremely problematic as a reading of the passage, for multiple reasons. For one thing, it seems that *Saint* Paul should not himself be subject to this rather grievous form of sin. For another, it seems that such acts *are* sins, and so ought not to be dismissed by Paul as acts that are not his own. And this is so because, finally, it seems that such actions are

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willed by the agent. When I stay up too late, streaming yet another hour of television, this is something that I *will* to do, which is precisely why I am aptly described as suffering from weakness of will.

The commentary tradition on this passage, aware of these difficulties with the obvious reading, has proposed another possibility: that Paul is talking not about weakness of will, but rather about purely sensual impulses that are not willed because they are not *acted on* at all[^26]. This would include the sort of fleeting yearnings, impulses, and mental images that even a saint cannot help but have, which arise in any human being, simply as a result of being human (or, in strict theological terms, they arise as a result of our living under the punishment of original sin). These are the so-called venial sins, which one might well judge to be beyond one's voluntary control, and so one's responsibility only in a considerably diminished sense. Even on this interpretation, it remains somewhat startling that Paul wants to treat such "doings" (ὃ κατεργάζομαι; *quod operor*) not just as involuntary, but as not being *his* doings at all. But here we can see clearly in just what sense this passage subscribes to the will as the primary locus of selfhood. It is not that the passage is committed to a dualism on which Paul just is his will, or his mind. Rather, the scope of Paul's will is what marks off the scope of activities that Paul is willing to endorse as his own. As his will goes, so he goes, and if it happens that his body goes in a different direction, then that is not something Paul takes himself to be responsible for, even granted that his body is a part of him[27].

Once we associate the self so tightly with the will, it becomes natural to take one more step, and to see the will as the primary locus of moral worth. This is not to make the commonplace assertion that actions are morally evaluable only when they are endorsed by the will-that is, only when those actions are voluntary. It is to say, instead, that moral goodness applies, first and foremost, not to our external actions, nor to our rational deliberations or to our acquired habits, but rather to the will's choices. This is not a claim that Paul shows any signs of commitment to, but it becomes explicit among various later moral theorists. Most famously, Immanuel Kant begins the *Groundwork* with these ringing words: "It is impossible to conceive of anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a *good will*." (Kant, 1998, p. 9). This sort of thought is completely alien to Aquinas, for whom *everything* that exists is good, just insofar as it has existence (Aquinas, 1950-53, 1a 5.3). And even with regard to the narrow domain of moral goodness, Aquinas locates it no more on the intellectual side than on the volitional side, and associates it more with the virtues than with the faculty of will itself.

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Among medieval philosophers, Peter Abelard (1079-1142) is very clear about locating moral worth at the place where we consent or form an intention to act, rather than at the action itself, or at our acquired dispositions toward action. As Abelard writes: "A person's intention is called good in itself, but his deed is not called good from itself, but rather because it proceeds from a good intention." (Abelard, 1995, n. 91, n. 106). This view gets taken up by the voluntarist movement of the fourteenth century. Ockham, for instance, holds that the only necessarily virtuous human act is an act of the will (William of Ockham, 1991). The more one accentuates the autonomous role of the will in decision making, and its preeminent place in moral agency, the more natural it becomes to think of the will as the primary locus of moral worth. Our various other features as human beings determine much of who we are: whether we are healthy and athletic, bold or shy, wise or witless. But on this voluntarist picture our goodness as moral agents is a product, first and foremost, of our will and the choices it makes. One finds this sort of position articulated very vividly in Peter John Olivi (1247/8-1298), one of the forerunners of the voluntarist movement, who writes that "nothing beneath God is as beloved and as dear to us as the freedom and power of our own will. For this is a thing we value infinitely, we value it more than all the things that God could make, which are infinite, and more than anything that is in us." (Emmen, 1966, p. 98).

The Clerk's Tale

Another place to look for signs of the preeminent role of the will in human agency is the Clerk's Tale from the *Canterbury Tales* (see Correale & Hamel, 2002). That story, of Griselda's obedience in the face of the trials to which her husband Walter subjects her, was one of the most popular of medieval tales. It first appears in writing in Italian at the end of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, then in Petrarch's Latin version of 1373, and from there quickly into French and into Chaucer's Middle English. This poem remains one of the most discussed of Chaucer's tales. Critics have been fascinated by the complex relationship of Chaucer's text to his source material and by the various levels of meaning that the story both offers and resists. At the same time readers have tended to find the story morally repulsive from nearly every available perspective[^28].

The Clerk's Tale describes a series of trials that a powerful Piedmontese marquis, Walter, inflicts on his young wife, Griselda, whom he had lifted from obscure poverty. First, he seizes one of their two children, then the other, leaving her to believe that both

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have been put to death. Ultimately, on the grounds that he means to take a new wife, he expels her from his palace, leaving her to return to her childhood home possessed of nothing but a thin undergarment. Finally, he invites her back as a chambermaid to help prepare the palace for the new wedding. Walter's motive, throughout, is simply this:

> "This markys in his herte longeth so
>
> To tempte his wyf, hir sadnesse for to knowe, *sadnesse : constancy*
>
> That he ne myghte out of his herte throwe
>
> This merveillous desir his wyf t'assaye". (451-54) *t'assaye : to test*

Griselda patiently accepts all of these trials, adhering to her initial pledge to "... nevere willyngly, In werk ne thoght, ... yow disobeye" (362-63). When Walter sees that she is committed to this pledge no matter what suffering he inflicts on her, he restores her to his side, along with the children she has been parted from for years, and thereafter they live "ful many a yeer in heigh prosperitee" (1128).

On its face, everything about the story is horrific. Walter, obsessed by his years-long program of trials, subjects Griselda to the most appalling suffering, which Chaucer depicts in vivid and wrenching detail. Griselda, having sworn to obey, feels duty bound to accept these horrors without resisting in the slightest or displaying even a fleeting change in emotion:

> "He [Walter] waiteth if by word or contenance
>
> That she to hym was changed of corage, *of corage : in affection*
>
> But nevere koude he fynde variance." (708-10)

Griselda's weirdly preternatural outward complacency, described in detail after each of Walter's appalling trials, makes the horror of the tale even greater. And the overall

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dissonance is magnified by the way that the narrator (the clerk), even while he registers that Walter's behavior is "nedelees," "yvele" and "wikke" (455, 460, 785), unstintingly praises Griselda throughout as the "flour of wyfly pacience" (919).

For medieval and modern readers alike, these repellant features of the poem make it natural to look for some further meaning, and one hardly needs to scratch at the surface to see what that might be. The story, at least in rough outline, offers a perfect parable of a Christian life on the moral stage, patiently suffering life's adversities while all the time persisting in one's love of God. We grow up, we marry, we have children; we suddenly lose a child who had been in perfect health, and then we suddenly lose another. We die, we return home in a burial shroud, and then we are resurrected in a joyous reunion with God and our departed love ones. No medieval reader could miss the way that Griselda pledges herself to Walter in just the way that Christians are meant to pledge themselves to God. Beyond her initial and often repeated vow to conform her will to his, she makes Walter into the supreme object of her love:

> "Ne nevere, for no wele ne no wo, *wele : happiness | wo: woe*
>
> Ne shal the goost withinne myn herte stente *goost : spirit | stente : cease*
>
> To love yow best with al my trewe entente." (971-73)

If we read the story as a parable of a Christian's life on earth, such a vow makes perfect sense, as does the story's joyous conclusion, in which all is forgiven, and Griselda rejoices in having received from Walter her heart's desire:

> "Grauntmercy, lord, God thanke it yow," quod she,
>
> "That ye han saved me my children deere!
>
> Now rekke I nevere to been deed right heere; *not at all concerned about dying*
>
> Sith I stonde in youre love and in youre grace,

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No fors of deeth, ne whan my spirit pace!" (1088-92) *pace : may pass away*

This sounds a lot like a description of heavenly beatitude, in which one's presence before God's love is secured, and all fear for the future has been dispelled. What has brought Griselda to this state, needless to say, is her perfect patience and obedience.

One could tell the story in such a way that it bears this spiritual reading, Indeed, Petrarch tells us that this is precisely how he means the story to be understood, and the clerk acknowledges that this was Petrarch's intent:

"And herkneth what this auctour seith therfoore. *this auctour : Petrarch*

This storie is seyd nat for that wyves sholde

Folwen Grisilde as in humylitee,

For it were inportable, though they wolde, *inportable : intolerable*

But for that every wight, in his degree,

Sholde be constant in adversitee

As was Grisilde; therfore Petrak writeth

This storie, which with heigh stile he enditeth. *enditeth : composes*

For sith a womman was so pacient

Unto a mortal man, wel moore us oghte

Receyven al in gree that God us sent; *in gree : with a good will*

For greet skile is he preeve that he wroghte". (1142-52) *it is very reasonable that God test what he made*

Petrarch's version admits of this sort of spiritual reading, because it systematically elevates the virtues of Walter and makes excuses for his excesses. Chaucer's Walter, in

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contrast, is so plainly flawed as to preclude Petrarch's spiritual reading from the start. As in Boccaccio's original tale, Chaucer's Walter can be nothing other than a bad and tyrannical husband. No wonder, then, that the clerk is careful to tell us twice, in the above lines, that it is *Petrarch* who thinks the story should be taken as a parable for our relationship to God. As for the clerk's own feelings, those are perhaps revealed in the envoy that comes at the end of the tale, which runs in part:

> "O noble wyves, ful of heigh prudence,
>
> Lat noon humylitee youre tonge naille,
>
> Ne lat no clerk have cause or diligence *diligence : zeal*
>
> To write of yow a storie of swich mervaille" (1183-86)

With this mocking song the Clerk's Tale comes to an end, leaving us completely in the dark about what, if anything, we were to learn from the story of Griselda and Walter[^29].

My own suggestion is that we can profitably treat the story as a case study in how to think about will and freedom. The clerk-whom the general prologue tells us is an Oxford philosopher-offers us a clash between two rival modes of moral agency. On the one hand we have Walter, who is obsessively concerned with preserving his freedom to do whatever he wants[^30]. Chaucer highlights, over and over, that Walter is a man whose wants are shaped by desires that are *subrational* rather than the rationally endorsed desires of rational appetite. So, when we first meet him, he is described as fair and strong and young, and full of honor and courtesy, and "discreet ynough" to govern his country. But then Chaucer immediately adds that his character admits of one great flaw:

> "I blame hym thus: that he considered noght
>
> In tyme comynge what myghte hym bityde, *bityde : happen to him*

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But on his lust present was al his thoght, *lust present : present desire*

As for to hauke and hunte on every syde." (78-81)

Reminders of Walter's single-minded focus on his improvident present desires run all through the poem, typically expressed in the language of lust, delight, and pleasure

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