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## To Will or Not to Will: A Close Reading and Interpretation of Augustine's Argument in 'Confessions'

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## To Will or Not to Will: A Close Reading and Interpretation of Augustine's Argument in 'Confessions'

### Writing Process

After receiving the assignment, I went back and re-read sections 20-24 in Chapter VIII of *Confessions*. These are the sections in which Augustine details his belief of two wills, a willing will and an unwilling will, and then proceeds to attack the Manichee faith, the religion he used to belong to, for their belief of a good and evil will. From there, I analyzed Augustine's arguments and summarized them before focusing in on making Augustine's argument the weaker one, instead siding with the Manichees that Augustine is arguing against in this chapter of the book. I approached it as seeing the Manichees as human, so they would be able to distinguish right from wrong despite what Augustine thought. I also elaborated on the idea that even if there is indecision in the right action to take, the Manichees still act, where Augustine wouldn't when confronted with his unwilling will.

After having Dr. Mackay run over my rough draft and the Write Place here at Dayton go over it a bit further, I submitted it for grading, where Dr. Mackay told me about the potential for publication here.

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ASI110

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### Instructor

Elizabeth Mackay

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# To Will or Not to Will: A Close Reading and Interpretation of Augustine's Argument in 'Confessions'

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*Garrett Reese*

In his book *Confessions*, Augustine elaborates on how he has been struggling with leaving Manicheism for Catholicism. By this time in his life, he has established his own beliefs when it comes to the human will that contradict that of the Manichean version of the will, which he highlights in Book VIII. The Manichees were a denomination of Christianity who believed that humans had two wills: a good will and an evil will. Augustine, who believed in a more willing versus unwilling will, sees the Manichean view as not only wrong and easily misconstrued, but also evil. In this essay, I intend to show that despite Augustine's claims of evil confusing the Manichees, one of the options has to be inherently good in comparison to the other. And even if it is evil, they are still acting and doing something, which Augustine would not be with his "unwilling spirit." Interrupting his argument of these ideas with the philosophical case, however jarring, serves to justify in Augustine's eyes the necessity of his conversion, highlighting the forgiveness in Catholicism and the inclusion of the downtrodden and lost.

In section 20 of Book VIII, Augustine immediately jumps into his claim of the argument that largely makes up sections 20 and 21, that of the body and the will. Augustine is torn over the will commanding but the body not obeying. The idea of the mind commanding but not obeying is what Augustine describes as a "monstrous situation" (147). Augustine states that it is easier for the body to obey the will than it is for the will to obey itself. When the will commands an arm to move, the arm moves, Augustine states, but there are times when the will commands the mind to do something and it just doesn't do it (147). In

Augustine's case, this would be his conversion. He has been trying to will himself to convert to Christianity, but he just cannot seem to obey. This is where he asserts that there are two wills, the willing and the unwilling. If the strength of the will is strong, it is willing, and it will be able to command itself. However, if it is weaker, it is unwilling, and the action won't take place. This is his version of the Manichean school of thought when it comes to wills.

Section 22 begins with Augustine calling out the Manichees for believing what they do, which will be highlighted in more detail below. This section is important to his argument for what he contributes toward the end. He admits that in his deliberation "about serving [his] Lord God," Augustine struggles with converting (148). He grapples with the willing and the unwilling will in him, elaborating on the points he brought up in the previous two sections. Because he himself is "neither wholly willing nor wholly unwilling," his will cannot command itself, and he cannot convert (148). Using himself as an example brings further evidence and credibility to his argument, showing that his theory of wills works in practice. He continues to elaborate on his theory, bringing up a Catholic-based reason for why there is this dissociation between his wills. The reason for this conflict of wills in Augustine's eyes is Original Sin. Because Adam and Eve took from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, their descendants will forever be cursed with conflicting wills. Tying together his philosophy with a core component of Christianity supplies his thought with a sturdy foundation and a strong jumping-off point for those practicing Christianity. It supplies a reason for indecisiveness that could inevitably lead to sin, which would more than likely comfort those like Augustine who were struggling with indecisiveness.

Sections 23 and 24 are where Augustine really steps into his argument for wills against the Manichees. This is where he firmly establishes his claim that the Manichees are entirely wrong in their belief of the two wills being that of a good will and an evil will. Augustine sees this as not only a wrong approach, but a flawed one. Using the scenario of having a Catholic go to a Catholic church or to the theater, the Manichean school of thought would become confused and would collapse. If a Manichee would agree that the Catholic should go to their church, they would have to concede that the Catholic religion is superior to their own, which would clearly be unsavory to them. If they suggest going to the theater, that would mean contradicting their own beliefs of being against the theater. This would create a conflict, and a Manichee would have no idea what to choose. They would be stuck, according to Augustine. He continues to elaborate with other

scenarios such as killing someone with poison versus killing someone with a knife, committing adultery or not, or stealing or not. Both options are evil, and thus the Manichean ideology is flawed. Augustine states that the wills “tear the mind apart by the mutual incompatibility” they hold (150). Even if both options were good as opposed to the evil scenarios he mentioned before, Augustine maintains that a Manichee would still be conflicted over the allure of two good things. The Manichean philosophy, then, is wrong and impractical, according to Augustine.

Augustine’s argument against the Manichees leaves something very crucial out of it – the fact that Manichees are people, too. They know the difference between right and wrong, and they also know how to pick the lesser of two evils. While he may have a point with a Manichee struggling between two good options and their strong allure, any human being, when presented with two seemingly bad options, can determine which one is the lesser of two evils. In his example of the church or the theater, a Manichee may still side with going to the church, as it shows piety and loyalty to a religion and God, even if it’s not their own religion. In the example of murdering someone with poison or a knife, one can always choose the option that would be quickest and the least painful to spare the person a slow and agonizing death. The choices still may be unsavory and still not exactly “good,” but it can be the lesser evil. Augustine’s argument seems to rely on the fact that a Manichee can only see the world in black and white and has to strictly follow that basis, no matter the cost. Manichees are people too, and they can determine shades of good when presented two evil options.

Another lacking aspect of Augustine’s argument lies within his idea of the two wills. When one thinks of unwilling, that usually connotes inactivity. In a struggle between two evil wills or two good wills, a Manichee can act. As mentioned above, even while grappling with two similar wills, a Manichee will eventually choose between them. However, when Augustine struggles with his wills, he doesn’t act. In fact, that’s the whole purpose of *Confessions*, as Augustine struggles with his unwilling will when it comes to converting to Catholicism. If the outcome isn’t exactly desirable, a Manichee will still act. Even though Augustine lambasts the Manichees for the potential to be indecisive, Augustine is indecisive and held back by his wills. Even when coming to terms with it in section 22, he won’t even take the whole blame for his unwillingness. In the summary for this section, Augustine blames the split in wills on Original Sin, saying that it wasn’t him that “brought this about ‘but sin which dwelt in me,’ sin

resulting from the punishment of a more freely chosen sin, because I was a son of Adam” (149). So not only is Augustine hypocritical in calling out the Manichees for being caught between two wills and being unable to act, he himself can’t even take the blame for being indecisive. While serving as a good method for recruiting those of a similar mindset to his own, it serves poorly as an argument with which to defend himself.

While struggling with his conversion to Christianity, Augustine bared his soul for all to see in his *Confessions*. Up until that point in *Confessions*, Augustine had been telling the tale of two men who converted to Christianity and how he was intrigued by this. That was all interrupted when he brought up the Manichees and the philosophy of wills. Augustine could be bringing up the Manichean faith to push them away and begin to refute their system of beliefs. Augustine brings the Manichean beliefs, which he is in the process of abandoning for the more inclusive and forgiving Catholicism, into sharp contrast with what he has been discussing up until the sudden interjection. He cares about and brings up the Manichean belief system just to tear it down and glorify his new faith. In bringing them up, he’s trying to show their wrongness in comparison to the religion he chose in the end.

**Works Cited**

Augustine. *Confessions*. Translated by Henry Chadwick, Oxford University Press, 2008.