

Will†

Narve Strand, 02/07/14 (v.1.5.)

Will (*Villie*—noun; *villē*—verb; *Villen*—verbal noun)

From the Old Danish *willi* or *williæ* or *wilia*, Old Norse *vili* or *vilja*-. The lexical meaning of the Danish term is the capacity or trait of being able to make choices, or to arrive at and stick to a decision, or purpose, which might manifest itself in behavior. Qualified, it names a capacity or trait or state or activity of the soul. It can also just mean predisposition, need, wish, self-assertion, stubbornness, demand, or command.¹

The term figures most prominently in *Philosophical Fragments*, then *The Concept of Anxiety*, *The Sickness unto Death*, *Either/Or* (pseudonymous works), and *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* and *Works of Love* (signed works). There are also some remarks in his journals and notebooks, but nowhere in the Kierkegaardian *corpus* do we find an in-depth, hands-on discussion of the concept itself, as with terms such as “anxiety” or “love.” To speak of a concept of will in Kierkegaard involves some reconstruction.

† Author's version. Please do not quote or cite.

¹*Ordbog over det Danske Sprog*, vols. 1-28, published by the Society for Danish Language and Literature, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1918-56, vol. 26, columns 1579-1604.

(1) The basic conceptual requirement of will is that there is something up to us, in our power, as opposed to what we are unable to influence or do something about, or what just happens anyway either by force or luck. This is tied (2) to negative possibility (not only willing this thing or in this way but not willing it), and (3) to the counterfactual (that one could have willed or done otherwise). (4) Consciousness is bound to be involved too, then (self-awareness, being conscious of various possibilities, not just intending what is at hand). This scheme (1)-(4) underlies both intellectualist and voluntarist defenses of the will, as well as the distinction between first-order agency (words and deeds) and that of the second-order (psychological states, existential orientation or choice). For the intellectualist the will is not merely dependent on the intellect, or practical reason, or deliberation; it is a direct expression or epiphenomenon of these. The voluntarist denies this, claiming it is the will that most deeply characterizes the self instead.² Kierkegaard follows this scheme (1)-(4) throughout his writings, and he is best seen as (5) a voluntarist. Ultimately though, his focus lies elsewhere: (6) with a Christian existentialist notion of willing only the good.

I. What Is Up To Us

The Sophists were the first to narrow in on what's voluntary or deliberate (*hekousan; hekontôn*), sparking off the whole debate on how free agency is

² Cf. "Will, the", by Thomas Pink, in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward Craig, London and New York: Routledge 1998, volume 9, pp. 720-25.

linked to chance, force, duress, weakness, ignorance, and blame.³ It is only with the Church father Augustine though that the will becomes an explicit concept (Latin, *voluntas*) and a comprehensive theory is worked out. For it is only here that will becomes the driving force behind all consciousness and action, both human and divine.⁴ In the “Interlude” of *Philosophical Fragments*, Climacus takes up this view: everything that happens has a cause and this in turn can be traced back to a freely acting cause (*fritvirkende Aarsag*), either of the relative or absolute kind.⁵

The discussion is quite articulate: all coming to be is a transition, a change or movement from possibility to actuality. Every transition happens by freedom (*Frihed*)—a freely acting cause. This is so in the realms of both nature and history. Whereas natural creatures are rooted in the present moment, historical agents have a double aspect (or plurality of possibilities), allowing them to be oriented towards the future and the past as well. Necessity is excluded on all counts because what is necessary simply *is* and so cannot come to be at all. Seeing the historical as necessary then is an illusion: all deception is will-based.

³ Gorgias (DK A26, B11, 11a). Antiphon's second and third tetralogies is one, long reflection on these matters. They are also dramatized by Greek tragedy—Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* above all.

⁴ For will as the motive power of the human and divine mind: *Confessiones* (book 13); *De Trinitate* (esp. books 9-12); as basis of human action (good and bad): *De Libero Arbitrio*; as the driving force in human society and history as a whole: *De Civitate Dei* (esp. books 14 -15). Augustine even thinks the will controls human physiology and spatial movement (*De Genesi ad Litteram*, book 8). See also Narve Strand, “Augustine on Predestination and Divine Simplicity,” *Studia Patristica*, vol. 38, 2001, pp. 290-305.

⁵ SKS 4, 272-87 / PF, 72-89.

Chance is excluded too, by inference, both because first-order and second-order agency are free and because natural causes all end in an absolute freely acting cause anyway. Everything basically happens by an act of will (*Villies-Akt*).

II. Negative Possibility

Will involves spontaneity. Being something that happens or is done by our own initiative, what is voluntary cannot be forced. To be forced to will is a contradiction in terms. Spontaneity is not enough though: without the ability to break off an act of will, or forestall it at least, the voluntary becomes something natural or automatic and in a sense necessary again. Climacus is alive to this when he talks about the will as a freely acting cause of plural possibilities. He then goes on to say that in the transition to reality (or action) possibilities may not only be assumed but may also be excluded (*udelukket*), being seen as nothing or made into nothing (*tilintetgjort*) by us in the very moment of realization (or acting). This is proof, he thinks, that human agency is not necessitated or constrained.⁶

III. The Counterfactual

An obvious objection here would be to point out ways in which we are not fully free (that is, being subject to external force or pressure, involuntary movements, pain, cognitive disorders, and so on). None of this is fully up to us, and negative possibility makes even less sense here, and so how can any of this be said to be voluntary? The best way to answer this is to say it is still voluntary but in a limited way. Even if we have no real control over nature or the acts of others, we

⁶Ibid.

ourselves produce the conscious states we experience (being hit versus feeling the pain, say). Talk of responsibility and blame, regardless, should only attach to that part of human agency that is fully voluntary. Kierkegaard is not all that interested in the physiological and perceptual aspects of the will, but something like a grading of the voluntary does seem implied in the whole discussion in the *Fragments*. The proper sphere of the will is freedom for Kierkegaard: only insofar as we are freely acting causes, with plural possibilities, does it make sense to speak of our willing or doing otherwise.

IV. Consciousness and Understanding

That Kierkegaard admits gradations in the will is also clear from *The Sickness unto Death*. Here, being a self is based on having a will, and the more will one exercises, the more self-consciousness (*Selvbevidsthed*) one is also said to possess. The will *is* the self in a way and its understanding and freedom are a function of self-relating.⁷ Anti-Climacus is acknowledging here that consciousness is at bottom the work of the will, which is not just the moving force in human interaction. The point is made openly in the appendix of the second chapter where Socratic intellectualism is rejected.⁸ Although there is always an inner relation between consciousness and will, one cannot simply equate the two: one cannot blame wrongdoing on simple ignorance (*Uvidenhed*) for example. I may actively work to blunt or obscure my knowledge (*Erkjendelse*) of what is right or true. Also, there is always going to be a gap between

⁷SKS 11, 129, 145 / SUD, 13, 29.

⁸SKS 11, 201-8 / SUD, 87-96.

understanding something and actually doing it. Therefore, conscious understanding may be highly complex and indispensable to human agency, but it is still the will that steers it and that acts as a bridge between the individual and the world for Kierkegaard.

V. *Voluntarism*

Given (1)-(4) above, a good case can be made for why Kierkegaard is a voluntarist. Will for Kierkegaard is not only the freely acting cause that links up possibility and actuality, thought and action; it moves the self. That he is a voluntarist is also clear from the fact that he gives the intellect, practical reason, and deliberation at best supporting roles in human life. Again, it is the will that steers and shapes the understanding, not the other way around. He seems to think ethical action is pretty straightforward: everyone knows intuitively what is the right thing to do in any given situation and no real conflicts or doubts are possible that would make deliberation necessary, much less the deciding factor.⁹ Last, in an existential and religious sense at least it is the baptism of will (*Villiens Daab*) that counts.¹⁰ Long, drawn-out reflection here is an excuse for *not* choosing or acting and therefore engenders a kind of irresponsibility—bad faith even.¹¹ The Kierkegaardian *corpus* does not really leave room for a positive take on practical reason.¹²

⁹For example, SKS 23, 336, NB19:12 / JP 3, 2874.

¹⁰SKS 3, 166 / EO2, 169.

¹¹Ibid.

VI. *Willing Only the Good*

This brings out Kierkegaard's real concerns in his talk about the will. If we stick to the difference between first-order and second-order agency, and between a psychological and existential gloss on the latter, then we can say that the Kierkegaardian *corpus* as a whole is primarily interested in the latter. The will is not at bottom an act of the psyche or a bodily state for Kierkegaard but rather a spiritual orientation, a way of seeing and relating to one's life as a whole.¹³ When key elements of the voluntary like decision (*Afgjørelse*) and resolve (*Beslutning*) are brought into play, they are also given this broader, existential meaning. That is why he can say that to think we can stand back from and decide between orientations is a fallacy. We are always already relating to life in *some* way or other; wanting to stand back and choose from a neutral point of view is like wanting to have no will. This is as absurd for Kierkegaard as being forced to will. Even if he defends freedom of will (*libertas voluntatis*), he ends up rejecting freedom of choice (*liberum arbitrium*) in the sense of freedom of indifference (*libertas indifferentiae*).¹⁴ It is not choosing between alternatives, but deciding on and sticking by the *right kind* of existential orientation that counts.

(A) *The Aesthetic*. The individual who has this orientation belongs to the lowest level of human existence. He or she is taken with possibility and lost in mere difference—plurality. Freedom is falsely thought to lie in choosing between

¹²Kierkegaard ironizes about wisdom (*Klogskap*), prudence (*Forstandighed*), the practical (*det Praktiske*). Cf. Gregor Malantschuk, *Nøglebegreber i Søren Kierkegaards tænkning*, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 1993, pp. 74-5. "Practical reason" is never named.

¹³Cf. SKS 3, 163-6 / EO2, 166-9.

¹⁴SKS 3, 169 / EO2, 173-4; SKS 4, 355 / CA, 49; SKS 19, 188 / KJN 3, 183.

alternatives and then living these out. The medium in which the individual views and relates to life in general is that of fantasy or imagination (abstraction). The dominant mode of will here is *desire*, it seems, and because of this the individual has no real regard for others either.¹⁵

(B) *The Ethical*. The aesthetic individual is in a deeper sense a mere watcher of life, indifferent to being a self. The ethical person by contrast is engaged in bringing this self into actuality, recognizing her ties to others.¹⁶ There is a shift here from willing variation to wanting some kind of stability in life. This is will of a higher power. The first form of the ethical is more outward looking, concerned with conforming to social mores or institutions (such as marriage).¹⁷ With the second there is an inward turn, and only now does the person really discover that she has a self, charged with the task of becoming a single individual.¹⁸ Ethical will is bound to fail in this though, Kierkegaard thinks, because it is vainly trying to unify freedom and necessity *in itself* (that is, in moral autonomy). For how can the will bind itself if it is essentially free (that is, command and obey itself at the same time)? How can this kind of unity remain anything but a thought? External compulsion is clearly needed if the self is to become fully actual. To engage others in a serious way means risking one's self-sufficiency anyway: that is what it means to act.¹⁹

¹⁵Cf., for example, *SKS* 3, 163-4 / *EO2*, 166-7.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*SKS* 3, 43ff. / *EO2*, 36ff.

¹⁸*SKS* 7, 505-10 / *CUP1*, 555-61.

¹⁹*SKS* 23, 45-6/ *JP* 1, 188.

(C) *Religiousness A*.²⁰ The ethical stage reveals something new about the will. As a freely-acting cause and a self-relation it is both spontaneous and free, but as *relational* it is always limited by something beyond itself. The self, paradoxically, is a synthesis of freedom and necessity though that synthesis is never achieved by the self alone.²¹ The will is not self-sufficient, which is to say it is not perfect either. A truly serious engagement with the ethical is also bound to involve guilt-consciousness (*Skyld-bevidsthed*) on some level, not just the awareness that there is a gap between doing what is right and getting rewarded for it (happiness).²² And since none of us is a perfect being, this is bound at some point to lead to an appeal to heaven. The self or will is radically torn, which marks the movement toward religion. The dominant mode of the will at this stage is *passion*, it seems, and the self is characterized by an inward deepening here, leading in its highest power to resignation and a total self-annihilation before the Divine.²³

(D) *Religiousness B*.²⁴ This is where Christianity comes in, a supernatural or transcendent paradigm largely borrowed from Augustine.²⁵ The will is not only imperfect; it is positively sinful. That the will is corrupt is not something we can figure out on our own, however: sin-consciousness (*Syndsbevidsthed*),²⁶ the

²⁰Cf. *SKS* 7, 505-10 / *CUP1*, 555-61.

²¹Cf. *SKS* 11, 129-30 / *SUD*, 13-14.

²²For example, *SKS* 7, 477ff., 505-10 / *CUP1*, 525ff., 555-61.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴Cf. *SKS* 7, 505-10 / *CUP1*. 555-61.

²⁵Cf. Strand 2001.

²⁶*SKS* 4, 411 / *CA*, 109.

knowledge that before God one is always in the wrong, is something that has to be revealed from above. The condition for becoming truly aware, turning one's will around, has to be given by the eternal God himself through the saving work of Christ.²⁷ Only through the God-man, this Absolute Paradox of the eternal in history, can a true decision be reached: either be transformed and made whole again through self-annihilation and a leap to faith,²⁸ or else remain caught between two wills (*to Villier*), two minds (*Tvesindet*), stuck forever in doubt (*Tvivl*) and despair (*Fortvivlelse*).²⁹ The latter decision is at bottom a defiant will (*trodsige Villie*) against God for Kierkegaard.³⁰ The first is something to be realized resolutely through a lifetime. The chief modes of the will here are *faith, hope, and love*.³¹

This raises a whole host of questions of course, the two most important being: "How does the will become bad in the first place?" and "How does Christ help in willing only the good?" In *The Concept of Anxiety* the first is answered by claiming that though everyone born after the first man who sinned (Adam) is predisposed to corruption, sin only actually enters by a qualitative leap of the individual's will. It is freedom itself, the sheer possibility of *being able*, and the

²⁷ SKS 4, 258-71 / PF, 55-71.

²⁸ SKS 4, 161-2 / FT, 69; SKS 7, 97 / CUP1, 98-9.

²⁹ SKS 4, 430 / CA, 129; SKS 8, 144, 169 / UD, 30, 60.

³⁰ SKS 5, 123 / EUD, 118; SKS 11, 191-193 / SUD, 77-9.

³¹ SKS 8, 203-5 / UD, 99-101.

anxiety about and being overwhelmed by this that makes us guilty before God.³² But wouldn't this only make sin something inevitable again, almost natural? If so, how can it be fully voluntary? Is it possible *not* to sin? (Cf. (2)). Could either we or Adam have willed otherwise here? (Cf. (3)). Haufniensis has to admit that it is all very mysterious. Kierkegaard himself would deny that God predestines or discriminates. The leap of faith is still up to us even if sinning is not, and the condition for the leap itself has to be given by Christ. For Kierkegaard, Christ is also an example to be imitated in life. To obey the will of God and suffer everything for His sake; to love God with a resolute will by giving up all claims to human autonomy and self-sufficiency; to forsake the many and become a single individual: that is what it means to will only one thing—the good.³³

(E) *Religiousness "C"*?³⁴ Kierkegaard is a Christian existentialist above all. The basic point of convergence in the Kierkegaardian *corpus* is the God-relation. The way the will is brought out conceptually is mainly a function of this. But the Christian is not only commanded to love God with an undivided heart. It is also said: "Love your neighbor as yourself."³⁵ But how can anyone do both at once? According to Kierkegaard in *Works of Love* this can be done by existing and acting so that others may want to enter into the God-relation too. A right ordering of the will means placing oneself on the same level as others, loving them for the

³²SKS 4, 347-57 / CA, 41-51.

³³SKS 8, 123, 157, 169, 182; 184ff., 227-37 / UD 7, 46, 60, 74, 76ff., 127-39.

³⁴Cf. Merold Westphal, "Kierkegaard's Teleological Suspension of Religiousness B," in *Foundations of Kierkegaard's Vision of Community*, ed. by George B. Connell and C. Stephen Evans, New Jersey: Humanities Press 1992, p. 114.

³⁵Matthew 22:37-8.

sake of the good. The God-relation comes first of course, so there cannot be talk of any concrete or real dependence on others.³⁶ And as deliberative reason cannot be said to have a positive role in second-order agency for Kierkegaard (cf. (4)), there is no real place for it in human interactions either. There is not a place for reciprocal love or willing in this picture. But though Kierkegaard has yet to come up with a full-blooded social or political model of the will, he has nevertheless given it a kind of sociality here.

In the *The Sickness unto Death* the self is defined as will, that is, as (1) a synthesis of psyche and body (that is, spirit), (2) as that relation's relating itself to itself (in self-reflection and freedom), (3) as posited by and therefore inherently relational and limited by something beyond itself. This is also why the will only truly exists and reaches its full power when (4) it gives itself over to the absolute, resting transparently in the power that posited it.³⁷ (5) Nothing should ever be allowed to come between the will and God. This could stand as a summary definition of the concept of will in the Kierkegaardian *corpus* as a whole.

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See also Anxiety; Decision/Resolve; Existence/Existential; Desire; Faith; Freedom; Hope; Leap; Love; Paradox; Passion/Pathos; Religion/Religiousness; Salvation/Eternal Happiness.

³⁶SKS 9, 36-7, 51, 68 / WL, 29, 44, 61.

³⁷SKS 11, 129, 161, 163-4 / SUD, 13, 46, 48-9.