

St. Augustine and Friedrich Nietzsche on the Will: Two Views of Asceticism, Foundationalism and Time

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Time and the will are related. For Nietzsche and Augustine, time has to do with intellectual foundations. Time and the Will to power are both the result of our human condition: pathetic and getting worse. For both men, the ascetic life is necessary for any comprehension of truth. The very worst form of life is that of the western, modern bourgeois mass. They seek only superficial comfort and approval. For both men, the ascetic life is a rejection of a society that was dying around them. Whether it be the rise of the industrial mass mind or the fall of Rome, these upheavals force the best minds to find safe harbor. Unfortunately, Nietzsche found his in the same mind that was destroying the old heroic life he adulated.

One of St. Augustine's more famous contributions to the history of philosophy is his theory of time. St. Augustine cannot separate time as an abstraction from the existence of things that are measured by it. Time, in other words, is both measured by the objects involved as well as being measured by them. The fact that time might not be an object concerns Augustine greatly – since there is no period where “time” can be seen abstractly.

Time for Augustine is a matter of the human condition. Time is not “natural” to man in that it derives from his fall from grace. Time shows that humanity can grasp the fundamental realities of the world only over time, in small pieces. Man is an empirical being only in that he is a fallen one. God and the angels see the Archetypes of creation – the very universal truths that are only partially realized in the world. Human beings slowly gather sense data and begin in this way to uncover logos. He writes:

But far be it that you the Creator of the Universe, the Creator of souls and bodies, far be it, that you should in such wise know all things past and to come. Far, far more wonderfully, and far more mysteriously, you know them. For not, as the feelings of one who sings what he knows, or hears some well-known song, are through expectation of the words to come, and the remembering of those that are past, varied, and his senses divided, not so does any thing happen unto you, unchangeably eternal, that is, the eternal Creator of minds. Like then as you in the beginning knew the heaven and the earth, without any variety of Thy knowledge, so made you in the beginning heaven and earth, without any distraction of your action (Augustine 18-23).

In this particular case, St. Augustine is taking heavily from the neo-Platonists, contrasting the slow, time-bound way we grasp objects (the process of division between genera and species) to the nature of those objects in themselves as time serves to connect them all. Human beings learn through the comprehension of sensible objects, then abstracting from them, taking their basic universal features and creating a scheme of genera and then species – different levels of abstraction. Being a Platonist, these abstractions are in fact real (they are objects in themselves), but the problem is that human beings can only grasp them one step at a time, and the possibility for error at any period is high (16-21).

Time can then be grasped as that entity which connects the “pieces” of our knowledge into a comprehensible whole. Before the fall, this is not how men understood the world. They

understood intuitively, not discursively. The “nominal” entities are not real knowledge (or even real things) but they serve as low rungs in a ladder by which the mind can ascend from the things of sense to the spiritual, eternal elements that place them in the mind of God and in eternity (Augustine, 9-37, 38).

Nietzsche argues the opposite: becoming, that is, potential being made actual, is a matter of power relations, it is far more “real” than things that are thought to be static. Language becomes a problem for him in that these are supposed to be stationary definitions in a world of human relations that is anything but. Language cannot express becoming because language can work only if its structure remains static.

Language has to reflect and dominate time to be truly useful. On the one hand, it has to take into consideration that all things are becoming and changing, including itself. Yet, this does not take away from the fact that the will to power requires ideals and goals. One aspect of his thought similar to Augustine is that any use of time requires us to take a piece of it from the whole and artificially treat it as if it exists of itself. There is a “whole” in Nietzsche, but it is the constant creation of reality by those mastering their will to power. It is in this where language fails unless it understands the world as flux and that still, the will remains focused on a goal. Time is a construct of the will to power because everything is, but it is a construct more specifically because it is the conscious will reaching its own ideals.

Experience is temporal in part because the object and the observer constantly change and alter each other in the very encounter. The nature of an encounter presupposes an object that is static only in that we require it to be so, it makes things “manageable” in Quine's sense. The will too, considers itself static, but again this is not an ontological statement, but one reflecting the “brute given” nature of language as Being.

Augustine sees this as the nature of “corruption.” Decay is at the root of change in that non-being, given the imperfect nature of the world, is always chipping away at any neat ontologies or “life-plans.” the gap between being and the void is vice, and ontologically speaking, is the very conception of evil. In modern terms, being is the nature of creation and it is good for that reason. The “flux” is precisely the unfocused nature of the human will as well as the tendency of being to suffer from non-being. Like Nietzsche, the encounter between the two is between two temporarily static entities. Nietzsche sees nihilism as the result of the clash of the belief in being with those believing in total flux. The “temporary” and practical nature of static objects is something like Augustine's conception of “peace.” Humanity knows this is an ideal that remains as rare as it is temporary, but it is necessary for society to develop.

The will is tricky for both writers. Augustine stresses that the freedom of the will is something to struggle for, and is not granted at birth. In other words, that man is born with the propensity to merely act on the strongest desire rather than reason. Nietzsche too rejects the idea that the will is something static, an object of a spiritual nature that is inherently free. Sunk in the mire of sin and ignorance, it requires God's presence and assistance to drag it out. In that state, however, the person does not see reality, rather he sees only a projection of his own drives. Nietzsche states in *Beyond Good and Evil* that

Will, of course, can affect only “will” – and not “matter” (not “nerves,” for example). In short, one has to risk the hypothesis whether will does not affect will wherever “effects” are recognized – and whether all mechanical occurrences are not, insofar as a force is active in them, will force, effects of will (Nietzsche, 36).

This is not too far from the idea that the soul, consumed by sin, can only see sin (that is, the object of his desire) in the “external” world. In this case, the will creates just more of

itself while the self pretends that this is “matter.”

In Nietzsche's view of time, he argues that there are “two fictions.” The first is motion and the other is the atom or more broadly, the idea of an eternally fixed object, a fundament. He said in the *Will to Power* that the conception of motion derives only and directly from language. Mechanism derives from fictions created due to the need to see some permanence in the world. Motion comes from the atom and hence, time is a fiction of the desire of permanence. “The mechanistic world is imagined only as sight and touch imagine a world (as “moved”) – so as to be calculable – thus causal unities are invented, “things” (atoms) whose effect remains constant – transference of the false concept of subject to the concept of the atom. . .” (Nietzsche, 635). It is very important that in both cases, it is the will that projects its desires rather than the senses registering external objects. Ultimately, this is a “psychological prejudice.”

Vyacheslav Ivanov saw Nietzsche as the revival of the Dionysian, the negation of the empirical and piecemeal. He sees the “universal as accessible in the mystic worship of Dionysus.” The One, the principle of all, is seen in a “single, holistic experience and in true ecstasy.”

The Dionysian principle is antinomic by nature, and can be in many ways be described formally, but it is revealed only in mystic experience, and it would be vain to look for it as conventional understanding, or what it is composed of. . . . In epistemology, Dion proclaimed autonomy over the truly objective-mandatory; what matters is subjective truth, the truth of internal volition. Our means of self-assertion beyond our self is a matter of faith. In morals, he thought that life should be outside or beyond “good and evil” in that empirical ideas are rejected in favor of freedom. . . .

The point is that our minds are marked by tension. The mind is a pathetic, fallen object far more liable to error than truth. Yet it is also possible to come to the eternal and universal truths of logos. We desire these things but cannot remove self-interest and arrogance from our cognition. We suffer as a result.

In a famous passage, Nietzsche writes in the *Genealogy*:

You see that these philosophers are not unprejudiced witnesses to and judges of the value of ascetic ideals! They think about themselves— what concern to them is “the saint”! In this matter they think about what is most immediately indispensable to them: freedom from compulsion, disturbance, fuss, from business, duties, worries: a bright light in the head, dance, the leap and flight of ideas; good air—thin, clear, free, dry—like the air at high altitudes, with which everything in animal being grows more spiritual and acquires wings; calm in all basement areas; all dogs nicely tied up in chains; no hostile barking and shaggy rancor; no gnawing worm of wounded ambition; modest and humble inner organs busy as windmills but at a distance; the heart in an alien place, beyond, in the future, posthumous—all in all, so far as the ascetic ideal is concerned, they think of the cheerful asceticism of some deified animal which has become independent, roaming above life rather than being at rest (Nietzsche, 3, sec 8).

To a great extent, this citation from the *Genealogy* summarizes Nietzsche's entire point of view. The Christian approach of asceticism seeks some kind of a Stoic peace. The

ultimate goal is the freedom from the demands of matter, convention or power. It goes beyond Stoicism of course, but this is an accurate way to describe its secular aspects. For Nietzsche, power and matter are the only things in existence. The monk seeks liberation from that which is constitutive of the human animal – the desire for power, or, failing that, the desire to ally oneself with power. Nietzsche continues,

We know what the three great catch phrases of the ascetic ideal are: poverty, humility, chastity. Now look closely at the lives of all great, prolific, inventive spirits—over and over again you'll rediscover all three there to a certain degree. Not at all—this is self-evident—as if it were something to do with their “virtues” —what does this kind of man have to do with virtues?—but as the truest and most natural conditions of their best existence, their most beautiful fecundity (ibid).

This part of the quotation deals both with the ascetic ideal and the worship of the will. The great men of history have all been ascetic, yet, their ultimate goal was never the disinterested contemplation of the Forms, but rather the use and purification of the will to better express and unleash power. It needs to be stressed that Nietzsche is not opposed to the ascetic life. In fact, his “superman” is one who, at least at one point, gives up the banal pleasures of life for the sake of contemplating the newness he will bring to society. He does this in isolation. The pagan ascetic and the Christian ascetic are two very different things (3, sec 117).

There is a great degree of similarity between Nietzsche's approach to asceticism and Augustine's. The big difference is the nature of reality itself. Nietzsche stresses that there is no objective or given reality. Reality is a mindset that is created by the superior, the true aristocrat. It is created by those with the lack of connection to convention. Conformism, by its very nature, cannot be creative.

For the Augustinian, the nature of existence is formal and absolute, something to be discovered rather than invented. The Augustinian monk seeks to control bodily desires so as to participate in this reality. Asceticism is a form of preparation. By eliminating self-interest as much as possible, it is easier to see logos operate in the world. It is an identical ideal in Plato as well. Nietzsche is talking about the denial of the pleasures of the mass for the sake of building the inner strength that will come to create that “Absolute.” In both cases, asceticism is important, but the final goal is radically different. It is in the discovery of “ideals” that Nietzsche aims his attack, or the “valuation” he places on life. It is either ideal or conventional. Nietzsche takes the latter view.

Alexander Dugin writes on Nietzsche:

Morality is contrary to Nietzsche because it alienates people from the pure and supra-mental rhythm of life, from the primary source of life in that it puts a false image between man and the world; it seeks to soothe spiritual anxiety, substitutes a terrible and dangerous question “Who am I? What am I?” . . . Morality is a sin against life and truth. It veils the Abyss, protecting the weak, but Nietzsche could still recognize it. It vitiates the freedom of the superior, keeping a lid on the inherent elite will to the truth, the greatest sin of all. Nietzsche calls himself an “immoralist.” Human life has neither a view of truth or beauty, and so the will to truth is revealed the abyss of nihilism, and divides the old tables of the false morality. It raises a new problem: what to do with the void left by the decline of metaphysical systems?

Dugin's view stresses that the true "Overman" realizes that pain and discomfort come with the promulgation of truth. The sicker the society, the more pain will be involved. There, he agrees with Augustine (and Dugin too). The bourgeoisie seek the opposite: truth is not important, comfort alone is. The weak can only see laws, regulations, obligations and prohibitions: the most quantitative and vulgar, crude expression of morals, the origin of which they are totally ignorant. Again, there is no disagreement.

Nietzsche forced his readers to confront the moral decay and lack of order – the lack of logos – that modernity created. The fall of Adam was, whether he wanted it or not, close to Nietzsche's doctrine, but more importantly, the chaos it eventually introduced is what creates the need for asceticism in the first place. In the *City of God*, Augustine defends patriarchy by stating that servitude is a condition that must be imposed on the sinner. Chaos can only be challenged by this servitude since the will has been so radically vitiated. Coercion is the norm because man's will have been so badly damaged. It is not a moral issue but merely a fact of life.

The great Roman or Spartan warriors so beloved of Nietzsche and his followers are the ideal. These men were creators of reality, ideality and power. They faced a purely chaotic reality and violently forced their will upon it. There is no reality, Nietzsche says, but what the Augustinian monk wants to discover is only in his mind. The monk does not want to create anything. He wants to discover God's plan for himself and others. There is no such plan according to Nietzsche. It is another matter in his valuation of Augustine or Christ. Both of these men for Nietzsche were "culture creators" creating something almost literally out of nothing. The will of Christ and the church fathers is to be admired because they created a civilization that lasted 1,500 years. Yet, the problem is that they both took the emphasis on strength so common in the Roman or Spartan ideal and turned it into a passive desire to discover the laws of God in nature, the very logos Nietzsche denies.

Nietzsche's critique of the "ascetic priest" is curious for several reasons. First of all, in northern Europe, the Reformation and the resultant secularism had largely eliminated the ascetic ideal of the Greek or Roman church. The Lutheranism and Protestantism of northern Europe accepted the world for what it was. They rejected any sense of asceticism. Secondly, it is difficult to accuse the ascetic of passivity when the Churches and empires of Byzantium, the Franks, the Ottonians in Germany were anything but passive star gazers.

While the monastic establishments of these civilizations were immense, it did not stop these empires from thriving and conquering. The truth is that Nietzsche was assaulting the decadent and bourgeois Christianity of the commercial, modernist and nominalist world. He himself stated in the *Antichrist* that the church is a "caricature of Christianity" and "at war" with it. Whenever any view of the world is reduced to laws, rules and standards, the view is lost and irretrievably decadent.

Nietzsche, of course, is world-famous for one thing: his focus on the will. The will is the only creative force in the world. It is not only superior to intellect, it contains intellect within itself. This is another area of correspondence between Nietzsche and Augustine. For the Augustinian (and the monastic tradition in general), reality is conditioned by the will. It does not create it (as in Nietzsche) but it colors it. For the non-ascetic, the world appears something to be conquered, consumed. For the ascetic, it is something to be comprehended, its symbols decoded – nature is the manifestation of Logos, not the human will.

Nietzsche sees world history as the creation of a few important leaders. What they all have in common is the ability to stamp this chaotic world with their ideas, actions and power. In section 25 of the "Third Essay," Nietzsche writes:

People should not come at me with science when I am looking for the

natural antagonist of the ascetic ideal, when I ask, “Where is the opposing will, in which an opposing ideal expresses itself?” For that purpose, science does not stand sufficiently on its own, not nearly; for that it first requires a value ideal, a power to make value, in whose service it could have faith in itself—science is never in itself something which creates values. Its relationship to the ascetic ideal is still not inherently antagonistic at all. . . Science makes the life in this ideal free again, since it denies what is exoteric in it. These two things, science and the ascetic ideal—they really stand on a single foundation—I’ve just clarified the point—namely, on the same overvaluing of the truth (or more correctly, on the same faith in the inestimable value of the truth, which is beyond criticism).

This quotation again, brings Nietzsche's worship of the will into clear focus. It is one thing to claim the “creative” role for science, it is another to study the “man of science.” The latter is a bureaucrat, using the creations of others to understand nature in itself, or at least to the extent his methods permit him to understand. The symbols of nature for the ascetic are the “esoteric” elements in it, the “hidden” symbols found in the natural order. For Nietzsche, there is no esoteria only because the meaning of nature and human society is created by others. If there is an “esoteria” in nature, it is something put there by the superior minds, and is never inherent in matter as such.

Science is a form of reality creation. The founders of science (like the founders of religion) were superior beings. They manifest their superiority by forcing their own will onto the flux of the “natural order” and demanding that others call it “reality.” “Evidence” is not an issue since the framework that evidence presupposes is the creation of the will to power, usually one attached to a single great person after a suitable time of ascetic self-deification. Methods are part of the will to power and already contain the conclusions of the founder.

Nietzsche's affirmation can be organized logically from an epistemic point of view. The world is inherently chaotic. There is no “natural order.” For Augustine, the world only appears to be chaotic due to the fall of Adam. Human beings are the only creatures that can understand this fact and do something about it. The pagan ideal was to violently impose a strong will onto nature, creating “human society” in the process. This process also creates “values,” that is, the mindset of the powerful taken as “natural truths.” The result is that “values” become little more than an attempt to persevere a way of life.

One difference between the herd animal and the alpha leader is that the former believe the values of the latter to be “natural and normal.” Eventually, the Christian and ascetic ideal made war on the idea of the right of the stronger, and imposed an ideal of meekness on society. That is, that society cannot function without humility; self-denial was essential to civilization.

St. Augustine lived in a world permeated by skepticism. He lived in a deeply declining Roman empire very much unsure of itself. The old Stoic virtues were in short supply as Germanics poured in from the north and Turkic tribes destroyed their eastern border. In eras of chaos, the drive seems to be to find stable foundation. Similar to Descartes later on, Augustine was anxious to find eternal, indubitable objects. This then could be the foundation of reality. The “present” is one of these objects. One scholar put it like this,

The three dimensions that we customarily distinguish thus reduce themselves to one, the present, in which the past survives in memory and the future preexists in some way in the form of an anticipation. But the indivisible present does not cease to vanish, neither is it in reality entirely devoid of any extension of duration. The individual durations dovetail, so

to say, because they have diverse contents. The number of isolated intervals can be readily noted, and thus one is in possession of a remembered or an expected total durational present (Hausheer, 1937: 504).

Thus the metaphysical idea leads him to the Absolute: this “present” object, that which cannot be subdivided into smaller units, is precisely that eternity within which God exists. The “eternal” is not “manifest” in the passing of time, it is a different object altogether. The present is irreducible, without qualities or even a rational definition: it is nothing. It must be, since it is neither past nor future, but the moment it is considered, it is gone. Upon its arrival, it immediately becomes the past and hence, is no more. It has no temporal succession since it exists as the highest of abstractions.

The present cannot exist because it can be grasped at the moment of perception. It is only as past. It is not a future event. Therefore, it cannot exist. “If, then, time present— if it be time— only comes into existence because it passes into time past, how do we say that even this is, whose cause of being is that it shall not be— namely, so that we cannot truly say that time is, unless because it tends not to be?” is the famed passage from the *Confessions* XI, 14. The nature of this object, the present, defies description and even existence. Yet it is experienced and understood.

Augustine's entire approach is that the created world is a manifestation of the mind of God. Plato's forms were in God's mind, and they can be seen dimly in outline by men as they contemplate the world. Humanity is dependent and sinful, but can comprehend nature through the disposition of the will. A sinful will, for example, will see a very different world from the saint. This difference is not real, but only apparent in that it is a product of sin.

The will is paramount for both Augustine and Nietzsche. For the latter, the will of the stronger creates an order, a society, while for the former, seeks to orient the will to discover the natural order, which is truly natural in that it is “Creation,” the manifestation of God's word.

This distinction creates two different kinds of person: for Nietzsche, reality is the creation of the stronger. The Augustine, reality can only be properly understood when the soul is ordered towards the contemplation of reason. For the ascetic tradition, the material world is problematic because it provokes the desiring will. Therefore, the intellect discovers the structure of nature and hence orders the will towards eternity.

Nietzsche's problem with Augustine is really no different from the problem he had with Platonism and Idealism in general – the refusal to grasp that philosophy is as much manifest power as anything else. There is no objective order of nature since the very means we use to prove propositions about the nature world are also conventional concepts. To “get” science is to assume the nature of logic and mathematics themselves created by the same “scientific establishment.”

Nietzsche wins here for this reason: our methods of proof are intrinsic to the development of science. Yet, science is the creation of an elite (those who created the Enlightenment, for example). If science is the creation of an elite, then the methods by which we measure propositions must too, be a creation.

The final way to grasp this situation is to say that the human will must choose all the time. It cannot use the proofs that Plato uses in the republic because by the very act of adopting this method, you also adopt the doctrine as a whole. There is really no difference. The entire thing becomes an act of intense existential anxiety – axioms are needed for anything to be proven, yet axioms must be adopted. This means that axioms are adopted with no proof, such they are used to prove things. Foundational propositions are thus a matter of the will, not “objective reality.” Augustine would have no problem with this except as an absolute rule. Sin distorts the world. “Science” is a matter, often, of the state of the mind that

creates it, not of reality.

There is no reason to assume that one set of axioms are better than another, since there is no external set of proofs (an axiom is, by definition, a condition of proof). Hence, reality is about the will forcing itself on nature. The powerful have created the entire apparatus of what we call “proof” or “falsity” or “contradiction.” It's all man-made. All that matters is will and power. That is reality.

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