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# On Willing Surrender as Virtuous Self-Constitution

Bennett Gilbert

**Abstract:** Our cultural situation is to seek a moral form of self-constitution, rather than an ontological or epistemological foundation. Such a moral ground lies in the paradox of willing surrender of the will to do wrong or dysfunctional acts in order to enter temporally-extended processes of moral change. But the paradox of willing surrender of the will requires analysis. The propositional form of it cannot be sustained and must instead give way to willingness as an ongoing choice. The self-reflexivity of the will with which we accomplish this turns out to be a core activity of human activity that seeks openness to moral growth through humility. The paper suggests that self-constitution in this manner this is what freedom is for us and is therefore the source of our hope.

**Keywords:** Addiction; Conversion; Moral Philosophy; Personhood; Subjectivity; Surrender; Twelve Steps; Volition.

## 1. The moral turn in constituting subjectivity

Humility is an indispensable attitude for spiritual progress in virtually every faith tradition of humankind. Within ascetic or other devotional practices, it is a constant companion of every step toward enlightenment, even of the most profound and elevated kind. Outside of credal and non-denominational faiths, it is widely taken as a personal and social virtue that promotes private well-being and public harmony. In the Twelve Step tradition, it stands in a triad with openness and willingness<sup>1</sup>. Its fit with the other parts of the triad is intuitively clear: if one is not arrogant, once can

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<sup>1</sup> The Twelve Steps are the foundation of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and kindred groups such as Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Sex Addicts Anonymous, etc. They guides the practices of the approach to recovery these groups pursue, and they also establish the loose organization of all these fellowships. As developed at the founding of AA in 1935, they combine elements of American Pragmatism (especially William James' approach to belief), medieval Latin Christian mysticism (notably the concept of the "ladder" of spiritual growth), nineteenth-century moral improvement movements (such as the Oxford Group), and other influences (such as that of Carl Jung). They are not theistic in the common sense of the word. There is an intricate conceptual structure in the Steps, although people who use then concentrate on their affec-

be open to the challenges that psychic growth usually presents and then willing to work at finding a way over these hurdles. Someone who lacks humility is very likely not to be open-minded or willing to change even the most self-destructive dysfunctions. In alignment with the latitudinarian approach of Twelve Step work, humility can lead in this way to the benefits of sobriety whether they are taken as functional, emotional, psychic, religious, or broadly spiritual.

Were it easy to be humble to the degree that any of these paths requires, it might not be so dwelt upon; it might even not be an appropriate part of the struggles of emotional, mental, and spiritual growth. Most persons seeking humility at first see it as vexing the ego. It tangles desires for control and gain into a thorny, frequently painful *agon* with most everything we generally learn about how to get by. In some circumstances, it seems to be the enemy of survival, troubling the persistence of self-identity through life's difficulties or even biological survival. To the most obstinate among us, humility feels like death. Or like surrender: losing a conflict and turning one's body, or armed forces, or nation over to one's enemy. Why then would anyone surrender except under extreme compulsion?

Moral philosophers – and philosophers of action, to a lesser extent – have their own version of this. Being the sort of overcognizers that we philosophers are, they turn the psychic or spiritual *agon* into a logical puzzle. It becomes this problem: how can it be that not willing is an act of will? Or, how does suppressing self-identity add to self-identity? For anyone of an insistent rational turn of mind, the law of non-contradiction is the translation of physical death into terms of logic. How could a person accept this as responsible cogitation? Yet outside of the cloister, the notion of a willing surrender or will does not seem absurd to most people, although it might be puzzling. It is a paradox, not an antinomy or a fallacy. To become humble means to lose something, to surrender it. We might sense that one can gain more than one loses by surrendering that which harms her. We recognize that, like Zeno's arrow, there really is moral change even though we think it is logically impossible.

And yet what one surrenders in humility is not surrendered to anyone. No one else wants to have your dysfunctions. So this sort of surrender cannot be made as relief of coercion by a conqueror or a thief. One does it according to one's own counsel, or will. Nevertheless, because we passionately guard the liberty, or seeming liberty, and privacy of our will, surrender of the sort that leads to humility can seem to be surrender of the sort

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tive, psychodynamic, interpersonal, and ultimately spiritual effects. They can be found at <https://www.aa.org/the-twelve-steps>.

that leads to grievous, painful, and irrecoverable loss. If this is surrender, what sense does willing it make?

The state of human culture today is one of groundlessness, in which what theory produces no longer founds and constructs culture, other than the merely reproductive, from traditions or onto essentialized bases. In this sense, post-modernism gave us freedom, and a moral freedom at that. Choosing a ground was no longer dictated the responsibility of choosing is radically ours, not that of reason or divinity. This would seem to elevate will further beyond any situation of surrender of will. But we are now post-postmodern, with two consequences of interest to this inquiry. First, cultural and intellectual producers who are responsible to the times, rather than reactionary, recover and extend awareness of the many ways in which human will is limited not so much by raw nature, although this is not neglected, but, more pointedly, by the world we construct, with its highly organized and efficient systems of oppression, naturalized lies, and reification and with the effects we have on nature that threaten our flourishing and survival. Second, theory now often seem to fear that nihilism, notably moral nihilism or amorality, might blind us to a moral necessity, as reaction might aim to obscure the oppression and danger that the first consequence I mentioned aims to confront. Foundationless, ungrounded, de-essentialized we might be; but what do we do about finding where we are and who we are in such a way as to guide us toward knowing what is good and right to do and what it is wrong to do? We still are human persons who must constitute themselves in some way. The fully unfettered will that postmodernism gave us (in some respects) pushes the question toward us and pulls away many possible answers. In short, the paradox of willing demission of the will has an intense moral purchase today. It must be distinguished from surrender-as-death or as mere contradiction, and it must contribute to our self-constitution if it can do so.

In what follows, I will try to situate surrender in this moral turn of theory. To do this, I rely on the Twelve Step understanding of surrender, some strains of philosophical personalism, and some perspectives from the philosophy of history. My argument might not settle the paradox of autonomy – what binding authority does a principle we have chosen have over us since it is subject to our will? – or answer our concern as to how our creative agency can flourish in a heteronymous world beyond our control, but it can give us confidence and hope in assembling and asserting our subjectivity.

## 2. Types of surrender in recent ethics

A good way to disambiguate surrender is to note its earliest uses in English according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Most of these usages were legal. In Anglo-French law, in general, one surrenders something when and because the law requires or compels the transfer of a person, power, or property to another. The one surrendering might indeed choose to give up something, and in this case the law prescribes the formal manner of transfer. In other cases, the law coerces its subject to give herself or a good up for the sake of justice. The military or military-like usage was less common in fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, though not unknown. It seems reasonable to say that it was as much the act of transferring something from one party to another as the coercion that was the common semiotic basis of the two spheres of usage. The *OED* does not, however, give the religious sense of surrender as spiritual maturation; it has just one example of this usage. But this is closely related to the type of surrender I address here as willing surrender. But willing surrender as I will use it, obviously does not involve coercion; and the matter of to whom or to what one surrenders is wide open, for, since the act is voluntary, the choice of counterpart is entirely in the control of the one giving up something and can range from one's self to any kind of entity (such as a group of persons or a physical object) to a divine or cosmic spirit. Any sense of loss is also, therefore, mitigated, if not wholly deflated. Finally, the motivation for this act comes from inward understanding and not from outward compulsion.

The use of the term in some psychological literature is curious. There it is often held that surrender as emotional growth can never be voluntary or willed<sup>2</sup>. I do not understand the reason for this stipulation, and I do not see an argument for it. Religious concepts of surrender, notably in the Abrahamic religions, emphasizes the agent's free will, which God recognizes and respects. If, say, a vision or any words spoken by a supernatural being enter into the agent's decision, her choice is nonetheless always free. When God enters Eden, he calls out to Adam, "Where are you?"<sup>3</sup> This is a spiritual question God is asking; He compels nothing, at least at that moment; He is opening a door to humankind. This is a paradigm of the context for a notion of surrender in the relevant religions.

Employing the agent's freedom of choice in this notion of willing surrender does not depend on deploying a conception of free will in opposi-

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<sup>2</sup> See Drichel (2017), Ghent (1990), and Saffran (2016).

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 3:9.

tion to determinism. In fact, it depends on avoiding such a deployment. We are highly determined creatures, to be sure; and no sane person thinks we have unmitigated autonomy. And yet what we face in ourselves includes choices we can face solely as choices freely to be made. Indeed, we must feel that we freely make many critical choices in our lives. To the extent anyone feels a need to argue an idea of free will, it suffices to refer to William James' pragmatist construal of our feeling ourselves free as sufficient for our actual needs. This does enough for present purpose, and I should add that I have long found it quite enough for threading through the six-of-one, half-dozen-of-another debate on the matter. Or, one can rely on Søren Kierkegaard's famous observation that although we understand life backwards, we must live it forwards. This comes from an orientation different in many ways from James', but it is hardly less pragmatic, in the ordinary sense of the word. There is no reason, after all, to make a practice of free will into black-or-white only approach into which theoretical conceptualizing is often led by its rebarbative nature.

I wish to detail why it is that the quandary of free will versus determinism does not trouble understanding willing surrender, that it is the wrong road to take in conceiving this important thing in human affairs – a dead-end that hides the force of willing surrender. It is just this issue that has caused philosophers not to write much about willing surrender. The scant philosophical literature on this concept is a minor light in part of the free will debate over the last decades. The religious versions hold that it frequently is essential to self-constitution<sup>4</sup>. But it has failed to find philosophical interest and value in this idea, which has such very rich bearing on moral life.

The proximate source of this sidelight is Harry Frankfurt's concept of the way in which a subject resolves addictive compulsions by "meshing" her lower-order desires with her higher-order desires<sup>5</sup>. The mesh is who she really is. He understands these as two orders of volition<sup>6</sup>. Because the higher order is self-reflexive, it is not fixated on external objects, such as libidinal objects or addictive substances). Instead, its business is to constitute ever more complete subjectivity, which Frankfurt calls "whole-hearted". He takes this as the action of the free will, but he makes room for what motivates this free act. Motivations leading to both good and bad choices he calls "volitional necessities"<sup>7</sup>. This type of necessity is neither logical nor

<sup>4</sup> Clausen (2018: 10–12, 101–102).

<sup>5</sup> Frankfurt (1971) and Frankfurt (1987).

<sup>6</sup> Frankfurt (1988: 11–25).

<sup>7</sup> Frankfurt (1988: 86).

causal, but it is not a mere “spasm”<sup>8</sup>. It comes, instead, from care for what a person values: she definitively chooses *this* rather than *that*. Thus, it is the will’s own necessity, arising from the will’s job of constituting the self. And so, just because Frankfurt, as a full-charge internalist, is concerned to conceive of a way in which the will is free, he pinpoints moral force, that is, the non-coercive but very real motivating pressure of moral goods on agents. For him, this reflexivity suffices for autonomy in the sense in which we understand ourselves to be autonomous moral agents. His conception is not so much of the agent’s willingly surrendering will as it is of the agent’s choosing the more powerful and essential faculty of volition over the weaker and destituent faculty of volition.

To this Alfred Mele opposed his view that the real lay-out of free will is a combination of the agent’s history of beliefs, reasons, desires, and motives with some sort of unforced internal state<sup>9</sup>. The agent’s external causal history is in tension with her internal state, such that causal forces are compatible or incompatible with personal moral autonomy. History-as-causes might or might not thwart autonomy. Mele concludes that free will is possible but that taking “history” into account must make us agnostic on the matter. Perhaps he thinks the freedom of the will in any action depends on the facts special to each situation by which the agent is or is not under compulsion. In any case, his concept of external causes seems to mean that a free will either asserts itself or retreats. For him volition must escape any kind of compulsion if it is to be “free”; he finds that the best approach to compatibilism is not negatory but agnostic. In this way he correctly finds that Frankfurt’s conception of the higher, freer will lacks something it needs in order to be persuasive.

We see here that the either/or logic of causality in the issue of free will makes it difficult to conceive of the willing suspension of will (that is, willing surrender). This is because *either* the sort of free volition in willing surrender can be understood solely in terms of a higher-tier faculty that integrates the compulsory factors (such as addictions), taking them over by an assertion of the self-constituting will, as in Frankfurt’s work, *or* that the perplexities of the self-constituting will lead us to see volition as so mixed that we cannot credit a concrete conception of freedom, though it might exist, as Mele sees it. For both Frankfurt and Mele, the combination of willingness and unwillingness, which makes for willing surrender, is inconceivable. Frankfurt envisions only volition that self-reflexivity makes

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<sup>8</sup> Frankfurt (1987: 172).

<sup>9</sup> Mele (1995).

fully willing, and Mele envisions only a free faculty so dark in comparison with causality that we can neither affirm or deny it as a concept.

In response to Mele, Stefaan Cuypers developed a concept of “autonomy beyond voluntarism”<sup>10</sup>. Volitional necessity is a genuine kind of necessity and, consequently, to keep its necessitating force it cannot be voluntaristically imposed by the self on itself but must first and foremost be non-voluntaristically imposed by the cared-about object<sup>11</sup>.

In his view, something from outside of an agent, which either attaches itself to her by some kind of superior energy or to which she attaches herself. Although this force acts as a necessity, the agent feels himself volitionally strengthened and liberated in a special way. Even though his behaviour is not wholly under his direct and immediate volitional control, he feels himself more actively connected to his life<sup>12</sup>.

Cuypers broadens Frankfurt’s “volitional necessity” into a kind of moral force that persuades us. Here Cuypers stands in the vicinity of willing surrender. But he does not use the key terms in my phrasing of his thought – superior energy, moral force, persuasion – that pertain to willing surrender and therefore misses the key parts of willing surrender. Of course, he, like Frankfurt and Mele, is writing about free will, not about surrender. But this problem of free will leads Frankfurt, and the other in his train, to an understanding of free will that is in the vicinity of willing surrender and, further, arguably requires us to take up willing surrender. But they do not see willing surrender, because the bottomless pit of debate about free will suppresses the psychic, spiritual, and moral possibilities that willing surrender gives us. They do, however, show us that we need to investigate the idea of willing surrender in order to understand a part of the constitution of persons as moral agents. Cuypers *almost* sees the unique character of willing suspension of the will, and Frankfurt gives a clue as to the unique moral force that can motivate such a decision. But they do not see the conclusion these point to because their concern is to eke out, from between antinomies, a valid notion of free will.

### **3. Surrender as conversion**

The religious approach to surrender that I have referred to shows that willing surrender is not simply a trope or tool for spinning out a useful com-

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<sup>10</sup> Cuypers (2000).

<sup>11</sup> Cuypers (2000: 245).

<sup>12</sup> Cuypers (2000: 244).



promise in the free will debate. But the religious usage also must be distinguished from the philosophical and ethical concept of willing surrender.

In Christianity surrender is a step toward conversion, either from another faith to Christianity or from a spiritually unengaged Christian faith to a more active, even consuming practice in either private or public life or both. Augustine's *Confessions* can be read as a narration of the long road to surrender by its restless author. One of his realizations along the way is that autonomy of the will does not mean that the will alone chooses the objects of its actions<sup>13</sup>. The self-determining moral agent is part of a moral world and lives a life with God and with others forming a sphere thick with goodness and evil. It follows that moral autonomy – the autonomy of the humanly personal moral actor – requires relinquishing complete control of her environment. She must stop this futile effort, because to do something that does not succeed over and over again is hardly freedom. It is compulsions or addiction. By setting aside the fantasy that the human will has the power to control everything, a person can enter into a field of richer spiritual life and more deeply considered and more effective action. In Augustine's terms, the person who does this gives herself to truth. What could be freer? Therefore, surrender is a free choice to limit the will.

Or even totally to suppress it. This is one of the paths of Christian mysticism. For example, the anonymous fourteenth-century author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* tells us that we start with humility, which in love becomes thoroughgoing humility “so that nothing acts in your intellect or will but God himself”<sup>14</sup>. For the author tells us to enter not only into the cloud of unknowing, which is the state of accepting our inability to conceive of God according to his negative, or apohatic, theology, but also to enter into the cloud of forgetting, by which we detach ourselves from every earthly interest and allegiance in favor of deepening our position toward God<sup>15</sup>.

And so I wish to give up everything that I can think, and choose as my love the one thing that I cannot think. For he [God] can well be loved, but he cannot be thought. By love he can be rasped and held, but by thought neither grasped nor held<sup>16</sup>.

Here the perfectionistic structure of this type of mysticism, seen also in supererogation and ethical extremism, obliterates all rational control. The

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<sup>13</sup> Clausen (2018: 112).

<sup>14</sup> Cloud (2001: 21).

<sup>15</sup> Cloud (2001: 26)

<sup>16</sup> Cloud (2001: 27–28).

sole single task of willing is to position a person between, and in, the cloud of forgetting below and the cloud of unknowing above.

It is interesting to note that David Hume, the very opposite of a mystical and flesh-denying devout venerator, holds a principle in common with many devout persons, though inflected by his phlegmatism. Like Augustine, and a mystic, and just about any sensible person, he realizes that total rational control is an illusion. He just gave it up, accepting that reason is a slave to the passions, and just accepts the worlds as it is – no cloud of forgetting – and accepts the vast realm of things he cannot know, understand, or do, in order instead to aim for the calm he so deeply desired.<sup>17</sup>

#### **4. Willing surrender**

It is clear that the willing surrender is in the domain of issues of the will at its limits. We will see that the liminal sphere of the will has a very far reach. As in addiction and recovery from addiction, and like supererogation and mortal self-sacrifice, the will of the persons in these processes performs some kind of reflexive activity that tests the whole person in liminal situations, often with existential risks. The will being riven by no ordinary strain or conflict, persons whose will it is in these cases are subject to dialectical fractures that are not resolved by immediate exertion of the will because such actions are precisely what cannot be undertaken and are therefore at stake. The decisions stop the will from willing until an action, or external events, or the various kinds of oblivion that the passage of time brings resolve the conflict in some manner or simply bury it. For standard meta-ethics, the assertion of a sliver of free will, carved from the surrounding contingency and causality, resolves the *agon*. For the religious, the resolution leaves this world. It is theology that explains to us God's action in the souls of the conflicted. Such detachment from the world perhaps reflects the aggressively exclusive claims of the Abrahamic religions. And for the Stoic, in her Humean or other versions, a part of the will is reduced to reason, the evident flaws of which readily lead to a desire to be rid of it. What then, is a moral conception of willing surrender, in non-theological terms, if any?

The first step toward establishing an affirmative concept of willing surrender is to recognize that all the alternatives I have discussed agree on one point: that total rational control by any human person is impossible and that, by consequence, the desire to achieve this by force of will is always a

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<sup>17</sup> Hume (2000: 265–269).

failure. Total rational control is an illusion, as is volition that is total at all points in its course of action. Of course, if it is an illusion, then in being rid of the desire for it we are not rid of total rational control because this cannot exist. Instead, we are rid of the desire of the will – what we commonly call the most willful part of ourselves. This commonly spawns the really desperately dysfunctional manias of sociopathy, narcissism, and megalomania, the psychic economy of which cannot stand for imperfect control of the world and for loss or failure. Giving up the effort to have total rational control does seem to mean shutting off, or at least limiting, some portion of one's reason that is close to the will. Call it the most willful part of rationality or the most rational part of the will: there is something in the tendency of rationality to metastasize. The capability of the will to reason out the limits of rationality by seeing in these limits its own limits is a self-reflexive activity. Such action share the puzzles and paradoxes of human self-consciousness.

We must next, then, consider what this “willing” is in the act of willing surrender. “Willing” in “willing surrender” has two meanings. The first is as an adjective: it describes a surrender that is willing. The second is as a gerund: surrender is the object of this form of the verb “to will” as the act willing another act – a surrender – into actuality. We can put this in participial-adjectival form as: having been willed, this is a willing surrender. By emphasizing “willing,” we discover this grammatical amphiboly. Its two aspects are not inconsistent, since it is not contradictory to say of an action that it was or is willed and also has been or is willingly done. But the amphiboly does show that the its two sides have a temporal order. Willing a surrender to occur precedes a willed surrender. The kind of act of giving something up to or for someone or something that we are considering as “willing surrender” now has a bivalent relation to the will to execute it. Surrender thus becomes dependent on will because it is initiated and then completed over a time-span in which an agent wills it. This time-span can include steps necessary to perfect the process of surrender. Will is a cause and endures as a component of the effect its causal force. Here, as in many other human actions, there are two temporalities: that of the agent's internal volition plus that of the act's external successive components. This, in turn, means that the moral psychology and the moral axiology exist in a common diachronesis.

This is true, of course, of many actions. But when an action involves a moral change it has a special feature that enable human persons to make such alterations in their characters and behaviors. That feature is the inherence of decision-making in what I am calling the sphere of the liminal will,

which proves, as I will show, to be critical to our understanding of moral life, as it is the kind of will involved in deep changes such as recovery from addiction and religious conversion or any type of serious moral awakening and onset of awareness.

At this point, the amphiboly suggests that we alter the term of the concept so as to clarify the connection of its two terms. I will use *willingness* to name the action of the will involved here as both cause and effect. Willingness connotes process, an attitude that, like open-mindedness and honesty, is open-ended. And indeed willing surrender is poorly conceived as a thing or as a single event. Instead, it is processual. Willingness unfolds, advances, comes into being, and has consequences through its diachronesis. More broadly, this analysis argues for historicity-oriented, processual, and diachronic ethics, as opposed to propositionalist ethics, in which the techniques of analytic thought freeze actions into concepts and the examples generally have no dynamics<sup>18</sup>. When we think in terms of willingness, we not picture willing surrender as a monopunctual act of surrender, such as Lee surrendering his sword to Grant at in a house at Appomatox on 9 April, 1865 or Jödl signing the Instrument of Surrender to the Allies in a tent at Reims on 7 May, 1945. Instead, willing surrender is temporally extended willingness from which both causal will and willed effect unfold. At the start of this essay I used the phrase “willing suspension of the will.” It is a good summary or slogan, but it explains willing surrender only when we understand that willingness actuates both the suspending will and the suspended will.

This approach has deeper advantages. We cease to regard willing surrender as a finality. Instead, the experience of willing surrender now can be shown to be essentially open. Willingness is an expectant and open-ended attitude. It is a process in time. We understand it and its products through their diachronesis, which is the way that we live it, rather than as a propositional sequence, which is not the way that we live it.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, this accords with the position common to all approaches to willing surrender as moral change, that it requires, and occurs along with, rejection of the illusion of total rational control of other persons and of affairs, with its false certainties. Instead, it accepts that uncertainty which can launch spiritual and psychic growth because the actor is freed from the habituated dysfunctions that both ignite and mask painful conflicts. And finally, it

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<sup>18</sup> Extensively argued in Brewer (2011); and in my forthcoming *Power and Compassion: On Moral Force Ethics and Historical Change* (Amsterdam University Press, 2024) and in my *A Personalist Philosophy of History* (Routledge, 2019).

<sup>19</sup> Carr (2014: 211–231).

settles the pseudo-problem of non-contradiction that we observed. Only static, analytic, propositionalist ethical reasoning finds difficulty here; the experience of actual moral life does not. Volition in moral life, broadly seen, is a moving force in a moving world. Frankfurt's volitional necessities are not medium-sized dry goods. Awareness and acceptance of them dawn on persons over time, even if there are moments of thunderclap along the way or at the end, in order for the whole force of moral agency to be willed into activity.

With this undemanding, let us now turn to the way that Twelve Step moral psychology uses what I call willing surrender:

People who enter treatment for their substance abuse are often told to surrender, but that concept can be incredibly confusing. And interestingly enough, surrender isn't used in Alcoholics Anonymous to describe the Twelve Steps, making it even harder for a person to learn how to surrender.

To clarify, surrender means to stop fighting, to stop resisting everything in life. Within the context of the Twelve Steps, a person has to tear down all the emotional and philosophical walls they built up: No more fighting the program. No more fighting to do everything alone. And no more fighting Higher Powers and past resentments. Just let things be and let things flourish within.

Surrender is to make room for other things to grow and to allow room for other systems of belief. Surrender is to accept that life has been messy and perhaps miserable because of addiction. Surrender is to accept that the solution exists outside a person's own mind: "My best thinking got me here"<sup>20</sup>.

To surrender here is (1). to stop fighting battles one cannot win and (2). to stop practices and behaviors one uses in such battles that harm one's self and others. The two aspects are closely intertwined in the Twelve Step context because recovery from an addiction is a struggle against both the objective physiological force of an addictive substance and the psychic and spiritual difficulties that help to trigger addiction. The processes of recovery includes both inward and outward fights. The outward ones are struggles against forces that are simply stronger than any one person in the long run, if not sooner, such as the law, employers, and natural forces. Assertions of will do not prevail against these. In the inward battles one contends with the force of addiction but also, beneath that force, resentments against harms from the past or the present that remain in painful

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<sup>20</sup> Hazelden (2022)

psychic conflict but cannot be erased and the consequent dysfunctions that, although they worked or seemed to work in the past, particularly in childhood, are now defended not because they actually help the actor but because she so fears decompensation that she harms herself rather than face, process, and resolve conflicts. A person in recovery turns from battles against forces she cannot control by asserting her will in the spheres in which she can successfully act to her actual benefit, clear-mindedly understood. One gives up self-harming and futile fights by giving up willfulness in prolonging them. This, in turn, requires trust in some process that will mitigate the pain driving the addict's behavior, such as a Twelve Step community, one's inner light, the karmic cosmos, and any form of divinity.

Surrender here does involve giving the dysfunction up to something or someone, but it is vital to note that one gives up something that is within her self but that at the same time the entity to which it is given up can be either inward or outward. In this approach, one's will acts upon itself, in its self-reflexivity. This is the willingness by which one has the courage and power to turn one's will upon itself. The goal is to re-claim the will but on new terms, in a new relation to it. This relation is, broadly put, not willing at all in one's way of willing. It is, instead, not willing at all in the prior sense and is often understood to be – and actually is – turning one's will over to a beneficent Higher Power. The text cited calls this to “let thing be and let things flourish within”. And yet the inner flourishing requires voiding the isolation the text calls “mind”, meaning the willful mania to control what one hasn't the power to control, which is like using an old leaky pot, by developing new and healthier outward relations with others, who might include humans, animals, and divinities. Surrender, willing surrender, deciding to cease to fight and to find new ways of living, is a process of moral change, occurring over time and forming a history that, like all history, is interpersonal and social.

These features of surrender in the Twelve Step approach to recovery from addiction fill out our understanding of willingness in the decision to give up that to which the will is fiercely attached. One of our most common failings is to continue with things that there is no credible possibility of sustaining because we wilfully desire not to change. This sort of surrender is not just one capitulation or belief in cleromancy. It is not to lose the will or to become object. Rather, it is a dynamic of moral change that confronts the vice or neurosis that inhibits the development of personhood, despite the fact that such dysfunctions seem to protect subjectivity.

Looked at in this way and on the basis of what I have said, we now have an explanation of willing surrender:

Willing surrender is an internal moral process, extended in time, of cultivating (apart from, although sometimes in addition to, external pressures) the willingness to give up (transitively or intransitively) the willful desire to control matters in life and experience that the agent cannot control, including both external events and (especially) the agent's own non-virtuous actions and behaviors.

This characterization covers various features that I have discussed above, such as humility, the post-post-modern condition of finding prescription without the ideologies that serve to mask the ravenous will, the profundity of religious conversion, and the intricate dialectics of recovery and open-ended moral change. In addition to these, this definition centers the self-reflexivity of personal will. The three qualifications in parentheses serve to do this, at least negatively. This is important in understanding how willing surrender contributes to virtuous self-constitution.

## **5. Virtuous self-constitution**

It is not hard to see how, in a general way, ceasing to apply one's will to doing destructive acts helps us to become responsible, functioning persons. For one thing, it helps one to stay alive; a dead person, or one with profound neurological damage, no longer self-constitutes. For another, the experience of choosing where and to what to direct one's efforts, or will, is the commonest thing in the world. Logical paradox does not halt actions. And ordering desires with respect to their helping or hindering a project is common to most successful activity, whether inward or outward. Particularly in modernity since re-formulations of the concept of one's idea by Nietzsche, James, and others at the turn of the twentieth century emphasized our freedom to change personae, and in post-modernism, which emphasized de-essentializing our fixed notions of our selves and of the world, we feel that our self-reflexive will is an instrument for the freedom of self-fashioning, even if the individual person is no longer a sovereign little king in our complex societies and cultures. We have opportunities to create roles for ourselves. Our autonomy need not be absolute in order for it to suffice for our willingness to seek subjectivity, even though whatever we build it around is a limited zone of freedom. This is because we can discern less limited zones of freedom from more and even drastically limited zones that are destituent, such as those comprising fighting futile battles, compulsions and obsessions, drowning in shame, or morally and spiritually blind greed. We do not know what a zone of freedom will turn out to mean, and we

surely do not know exactly what human freedom is or is not. But freedom seems to thrive in such unknowing, at least some times. Its value is that it is a comprehensive way to look at forming the authentic self.

But, as I have said, the free-will versus determinism side of the cluster of issues we address in our daily coming to grips with giving up what we can no longer live with is the less interesting side of making moral change. Willing surrender sublates this issue and has more important things to illuminate that speak to the contents, rather than the conceptual form of our control of our will.

We see this in religious conversion. In its most all-consuming forms, the willing surrender of will often involves suppression of most of the content of non-observant daily life in favor of submission to supernatural goods. But we see it in two of the most powerful philosophical approaches to self-constitution, the existentialisms of Kierkegaard and Emmanuel Levinas. For both, dismissing the illusion of total rational control is necessary to authenticity. By re-configuring freedom away from total control, one finds a better freedom in openness to deeper realities. For Kierkegaard, the exit from all-mediating rationality means a relationship to the infinite as the infinite depth in one's self, the infinite in each moment, and the infinite love of God. It also means, though it is the case that he less emphasizes this and that scholars notice it less, that the being of each individual person connects her to other individuals through the infinite pool of existence in which all persons share.<sup>21</sup> For Levinas, the endeavor to exert total rational control must be overcome in order to enter into authentic relations with the Other, who is infinitely past our pinning down by reason. One surrenders her desire to pin it all down. This means to cease fighting and warring – to surrender all that. One orients oneself in the infinite to which God presents us in the face, the being, of the Other. Dis-essentialized, being is no longer bordered and armored but not rootless.

However, there is a direction to which willing surrender points us that concerns not the infinite but the finite. The humility involved in the concept asks us to recognize that we are often deeply ignorant of ourselves, of the divine, or what is good for others and for ourselves. If knowledge is power, then small or defective knowledge is little power; and with respect to things we do not have the knowledge to control, we are powerless. This position of finitude – limited, subject to error, part of a vaster reality – is, however, actually an effective tool in self-constitution, rather than being a destituent motive. In our liability to error we must rely on others to help

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<sup>21</sup> Kierkegaard (1995: 382–383); mine is a somewhat unorthodox reading of Kierkegaard.



us make good choices. It is essential that we rely on others in many broad ways in order to flourish. So much of the willful refusal to give up control, despite the fact that our best efforts fail to make sustainable conditions or results, is due to vicious self-constitution by which we isolate. We depend on previous generations' endowment of our epistemic base and on their experiences with managing human behavior. At very deep levels, personhood requires interpersonal relations; and subjectivity is barely conceivable without intersubjectivity. We might even need the awareness of other persons just in order to know that we ourselves are persons. The processes of willingness to give up the illusion of total rational control include confronting and overcoming our false fixed beliefs, if we have them, of our own uniqueness, or self-sufficiency, or inability to fail. All this and a great deal more are consequences of finitude. We live in time, making of our lives the diachronesis of inevitable, seemingly incessant change, in which we grow or fail to grow, and in which we end.

The attitudes I describe above are virtuous. When put to use in the formation of character, they arise from and contribute to the actor's connection to others, to society, and to history. History here is our historicity – the fundament to our collective body of experience in which we live in interdependence. We discover it, draw upon it and contribute to it, and then re-discover it in the processes of human development. The refusal to surrender, the ceaseless self-involution of prideful ego, which reaches its demonic and pathological state in narcissism and sociopathy, isolates us from history. Shame and resentment are part of the same egomania. Although they seem to locate us in past events, in reality they trap us in them, and thereby separate us from the larger, deeper flow that is the diachronesis of the moral life of each of us and of our common humanity. Any actor, when isolated in these ways, misconstitutes her personhood. Such actors attach value to objects they covet to remedy their loneliness and emptiness. They devalue their own personhood out of shame and pride; and then, as history shows, they dismiss the humanity of others. By refusing to make willing surrender, they hang on to what is not valuable and fail to grasp the moral worth of all persons. But by surrendering with willingness, they make room for others in their full worth and, ultimately, for their own self-respect. Willing surrender enables that virtuous self-constitution.

## **6. The source of hope for moral improvement**

We as human persons have a kind of will that, if not “free”, is willing. We have as willingness a capability essential to moral agency. Moral agency, in turn, is not a faculty or an invisible motor inside us. It is, instead, ongoing self-constitution, whether for better or for worse; and this we are entitled to call autonomy because, while it is not absolute, whether the agent chooses acts that cause harm or do good. The issues of absolute free will and autonomy address the nature of the will and part of its functioning. But these are not the same as the issue I address here: how does the self-reflexivity of our will work? For the self-constitution of subjectivity cannot be conceived apart from the self-reflexivity of the will. In the current condition of theory of culture - from philosophy to the arts to history to the social and natural sciences - the particularly urgent existential questions are questions of how whether we will our self-preservation or our extinction through war, massive injustice, climate catastrophe, and technological evil. If we can find openness in the willingness of self-reflexive will, rather than in the merely notional results of abstractly absolute freedom in a highly determinate and contingent world, then we have a hope of the human person’s being able to constitute herself as a conscientious moral agent and of humanity respecting itself enough to avert catastrophe or just the prolonged misery that the past shows and teaches us that we have built into the compromised and degrading socio-economic systems that rule the world today. If the alternative to surrendering unwillingly to their control is absolute autonomy, then we have no alternative because absolute autonomy does not exist. But if the alternative is the moral force in willing surrender, then we do have a hope of amelioration.

The concept of openness, as opposed to inflexible determination or sheer untrammelled “freedom,” appears once we separate willing surrender, as in religious conversion or recovery from addiction, from the free will polemics. What allows open-endedness to emerge is that, having taken the notion of willing surrender from these models of it, we can see the sphere of the self-reflexive will is not simply liminal, as it is with respect to the “ordinary” spheres of freedom and determination, but really central to the constitution of subjectivity as moral agency. We can of course regard persons as legal masks, as substances, or as bundles of feelings; but when we need, as now, to recover personhood in its subjectivity, and not as external social construction, nor as objectively rational substance, nor as materially observable feelings, we want a sense of personhood that is thoroughly processual, a being characterized by the activity essential to intelligence: a

being that makes, or constitutes, herself as a project in the world undertaken under the sign of normativity and understanding that marks the lives of all moral agents, whether they are human person, or animals that have such agency, or even non-material persons.

Thus, the “liminal” sphere of the self-reflexive will does not escape from history, as absolute freedom would and as mystical union often does. With its ability to move beyond itself whilst not losing itself, this sort of personal will can stay deeply constituted by its temporality and historicity but also be capable of changing. That change is moral change, the object of hope.

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