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Tobias Hoffmann, FREE WILL AND THE REBEL ANGELS IN MIEVEAL PHILOSOPHY

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Free Will and the Rebel Angels in Medieval Philosophy, by Tobias Hoffmann. Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. 292. \$99.99 (hardcover).

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Tobias Hoffmann's book discusses the notion of free will and its relation to evil in Latin medieval philosophy, presenting an overview of how these concepts and some related issues developed roughly between Augustine of Hippo in the fourth century and William of Ockham in the fourteenth. The book consists of three parts, with multiple chapters within each. The first, by far the longest, part traces the development of the concept of free will, and especially the various ways in which medieval thinkers attempted to reconcile its Augustinian and Aristotelian understanding. The second, shortest, part shows how thinkers responded, in light of their views on the freedom of the will, to the problem of the origin of evil choices. The third part considers a powerful test-case for the previously presented theories of free will and evil: the problem of the angelic fall. Overall, the book presents the various attempts to explain good or evil free choices as responding to the perhaps irreconcilable conflict between affirming, on the one hand, that these choices are free, while, on the other hand, also maintaining that they are intelligible and hence contrastively explainable.

The first part consists of five chapters. It starts with presenting the background of the later debates by giving an overview of the transmission of Augustine's account of free will, an account that is strikingly different from the later medieval ones and yet served as a reference point for most of the later authors. While the earlier discussions in Anselm of Canterbury, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Peter the Lombard focused primarily on the question of freedom—what *is* freedom and where exactly we can locate it—Aristotle's works stirred things up by introducing, among others, the notion of rational appetite, a metaphysical theory of active and passive powers, and imposing severe limitations on the metaphysical possibility of self-motion. The subsequent chapters in this first part of the book present how thinkers struggled with explaining why and how rational agents can be free if their choice, at the same time, is considered rational in Aristotle's sense, and how the will can be a source of spontaneity given that self-motion is problematic. The book presents these attempts from William of Auxerre to Aquinas to full-blown voluntarists such as Scotus and Ockham (and many authors between), focusing primarily on the difficulties concerning the relationship between intellect and will.



The next part considers the origin of evil, in particular the question of where the first evil choice comes from. Augustine presents this issue in form of a dilemma: the first evil choice must either come from something good (in which case it is problematic to explain why the choice itself is evil), or come from something evil (in which case it is problematic to explain why it is the *first* evil choice). Augustine eludes the problem by maintaining that ultimately, for evil as a privation of good, no causal explanation can be given; evil has no efficient cause but only a deficient one. While later authors tend to believe that they follow Augustine in their own accounts, according to Hoffmann, this is rarely the case; thirteenth- and fourteenth-century thinkers described evil primarily by invoking the Aristotelian notion of accidental causes, while most of them also maintaining that it escapes full intelligibility. The book presents this development from Augustine to Anselm to Aquinas to Richard of Mediavilla to Scotus (and more authors between). Hoffmann's claim, according to which the deviation from the Augustinian account is again due primarily to Aristotle and the new conceptual framework his works introduced, is overall plausible; although it is worth noting that the change did not happen at once. For instance, Richard Rufus, in the mid-thirteenth century, even though acquainted with Aristotle's notion of essential and accidental causation, is fully aware of Augustine's explanation, and explicitly endorses and elaborates on the view that evil can only have a deficient cause (cf. Rufus, *Sententia Oxoniensis* II, d. 34).

The third, final part of the book considers a particular test case for the accounts presented so far. On a first attempt, one may attribute at least some evil choices to defective cognitive and/or psychological conditions (thus, according to the Socratic Deficiency Thesis, defended by various authors as discussed in Part I, "deficient willing presupposes deficient cognition" (46)); hence, the difficulty of explaining the first evil choice escalates if one considers agents who are in ideal conditions both cognitively and affectively. Medieval thinkers treated this problem as the problem of the fall of the angels and attempted to give an account that would locate the origin of the first evil choice (e.g., in Lucifer's pride or his lack of consideration of the relevant divine precept) and yet maintain its free nature, while also safeguarding the theological doctrine that angels were created as good. The problem of the free fall of good voluntary agents in ideal conditions is once again exacerbated by considering the further issue of why, contrary to human beings making good or bad choices in this life, the angels are obstinate—that is, fallen angels persevere in their wrongness, while confirmed angels persevere in their rectitude—even though, at least in some sense, they remain free after their first choice. Again, we can follow the development of these accounts from Philip the Chancellor to Aquinas to Scotus to Ockham, and many authors between.

One overall impressive feature of the book is undoubtedly the range of authors it considers, and the way in which it succeeds in presenting them as forming a meaningful discourse throughout the development of each

part. We see the usual “big names,” such as Augustine, Anselm of Canterbury, Thomas Aquinas, John Duns Scotus, or William of Ockham. We also have the most influential theologians of the time, such as Bonaventure, Henry of Ghent, Giles of Rome, or Hervaeus Natalis. We can see authors belonging to the beginning of the scholastic tradition, such as Bernard of Clairvaux, Peter Lombard, William of Auxerre, or Philip the Chancellor. There are also authors who may be lesser known even among scholars of medieval philosophy, such as John of Morrovalle or John of Pouilly. Among the authors considered, there are Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, and secular masters, both in Oxford and in Paris. Some of the works considered have modern critical editions and copious amount of secondary literature, while others only early modern editions or, for a few, no editions at all. While the chronological cut-off point of the book (William of Ockham is the last author considered) may seem somewhat arbitrary, and the references to the later medieval and early modern scholastic developments of the same issues somewhat lacking, given the broad range of authors and the excellent balance of picking them across the usual compartmentalizations (such as religious order or place of study), the book provides a very informative general overview of the pertinent issues.

The other strength of the book is the exceptional clarity and care with which all these authors are considered. Although the book works with a few general superimposed categories—such as ‘voluntarism’ or ‘intellectualism’—that deservedly do not enjoy high regard nowadays among most medievalists, the authors are considered on their own merit, and the similarities and differences among the ones falling into these general categories only emerge as the book progresses. As Hoffmann initially describes it, voluntarists are thinkers who “[explain] free agency mainly with reference to the will,” while intellectualists are ones who explain it “mainly with reference to the intellect” (5); but as we learn in Part I, it becomes more helpful perhaps to think of intellectualists as those who, by and large, accept the Judgement-Volition Conformity Thesis, i.e., that “[w]illing must conform to what reason judges as to be willed” (46), and of voluntarists as those who reject it. As the overview of authors in Part I shows, there were a great variety of positions within these general categories, based, among others, on how one conceives of the *kind of* conformity at issue, and indeed, most of the authors presented (even such intellectualists by reputation as Thomas Aquinas) occupy a place somewhere in the middle with both intellectualist and voluntaristic elements. Thus, the book also demonstrates that with the required care, even these general labels can be used in a helpful way, when only providing a kind of general orientation.

Hoffmann also succeeds in the difficult task of keeping the book very focused, which is especially impressive given the medieval importance of the topic and the range of discussed thinkers. Medieval authors considered the topic of free volitions in a variety of different contexts: whether

or how the object of a volition causally contributes to or determines the volition; whether divine foreknowledge is compatible with free will; whether the will can be free given that God is causally active in all created causal interactions, including the forming of a volition (an issue cursorily treated in the book when considering Scotus's account of evil volitions)—just to mention a few. Again, when it comes to the origin of evil, there are many related problems: whether there *is* really evil; whether evil is compatible with the omnipotence and omnibenevolence of God; whether natural evil is a consequence of voluntary evil, and if so, in what way; and so on. While there are occasional references to some of these issues in the book, it keeps the focus clear: the aim is to explain the problem of how free volitions are related to the intellect, and the problems of the origin of evil will and of the angelic fall just serve to highlight the relevant difficulties. The book also stays clear, for the most part, of the interpretative debates concerning the discussed authors. While the secondary literature on some of the figures is scarce to almost non-existent, this is not the case with the major thinkers; the problem of evil in Aquinas, or the proper interpretation of Scotus's theory of free will or divine concurrence (just to mention a few) has sparked rather fierce disagreements in the scholarly literature. While it may have been helpful to point to some of these disagreements at least in the footnotes for the further orientation of the reader, foregoing this has allowed for a very balanced presentation of the views of both more- and lesser-known authors. Moreover, this close focus in both breadth and depth enables Hoffmann to present the various views in each part of the book as forming a real discussion, concentrated around the acceptance, rejection, or reinterpretation of a few central claims—without venturing into only accidentally related territories or modern debates.

Overall, the book is an excellent example of doing history of philosophy by way of an “integrated and granular” approach. It gives an integrated overview, since as was mentioned earlier, by the selection of authors it disregards the usual boundaries of the medieval system of higher education. It is granular because it focuses on a very well-delineated set of questions in a limited set of authors. As a result, the book succeeds in providing a meaningful developmental history of a problem throughout a rather long time period, without sacrificing accuracy when dealing with the individual thinkers. Being such, the book can be a helpful resource for medievalists interested in the development of some (or all) of the discussed questions, providing also a useful collection of primary sources for initial orientation. Thanks to its clarity and not assuming much background knowledge in the technicalities of medieval philosophy, it would also be a helpful resource for non-specialists looking for the medieval precedents of some later, perhaps early modern developments. Last, but not at all the least, it would also be an excellent resource for graduate students learning about medieval philosophy, or in general, learning about how to write about the history of philosophy well.