

A Review of the Development History of the Concept of "Free Will" and Its Metaphysical Implications

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ABSTRACT

The concept of Free Will, an enduring theme in Western philosophy, originated within religious ethics to address fundamental questions such as "the relationship between humans and divinity", "human existence", and "the origins of good and evil". This paper examines the evolution of the notion of Free Will through a historical lens, tracing its development and exploring its metaphysical implications by analyzing pivotal figures in Western philosophical history.

Keywords: *Free Will, Augustine, Scholasticism, Descartes, Nietzsche.*

1. INTRODUCTION

When people employ the concept of "Will", people instinctively perceive it as the driving force propelling human existence. Modern psychology defines Will as "The mental process through which humans consciously establish goals, regulate their actions toward these objectives, overcome challenges, and ultimately achieve predetermined targets."¹ The psychological notion of "Will" closely resembles the colloquial term "Willpower", referring to conscious intentions or tendencies within the realm of surface consciousness. However, the philosophical interpretation of "Will" fundamentally differs from its psychological or sociological counterparts. The Western philosophical tradition of "Free Will" originated in religious ethics, addressing fundamental questions like "human-divine relationships", "the nature of human existence", and "the origin of moral principles". This conceptual evolution has persisted since the pre-Socratic era. Through examining pivotal figures in Western philosophy, this paper traces the historical development of the "Free Will" concept and explores its enduring value implications.

2. FROM ANCIENT GREECE TO BEFORE CLASSICISM

2.1 Stoicism and Epicureanism

Liberty of Will is an ancient proposition in Western philosophy. During the Greek era, scholars like Socrates and Aristotle sporadically discussed it but failed to form definitive doctrines. The Stoics advocated determinism at the metaphysical level — Asserting that only things with predetermined content can be known, not those yet undecided. As staunch believers in causality, the Stoics maintained: "The cosmos is a unified whole where all things are results of prior causes, yet they affirm individual volitions autonomy — unmoved by external forces."² However, their theory of Will contained obvious logical paradoxes — claiming only virtuous will qualifies as free, stating: "When a person's divine essence manifests volition, it becomes part of divine freedom."³ The Stoics' conception of Will couldn't reconcile the essential requirement that "Freedom must be premised on human volition against evil". Epicurus, a materialist philosopher, "Firmly believed in divine existence while maintaining non-interference in human

1. Zhu Zhixian, ed., Dictionary of Psychology, Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press, 1989, p. 861.

2. Russell, History of Western Philosophy, Beijing: Beijing Publishing House, 2012, p. 66.

3. Russell, History of Western Philosophy, Beijing: Beijing Publishing House, 2012, p. 66.

affairs."⁴ Rather than denying causality's universal validity, he redefined freedom and contingency within the concept of causeless events.

In ancient Greece, scholars lacked a unified understanding of "Freedom" and "Willingness". With diverging interpretations of the concept of "God" across different schools of thought, ethical studies remained in relative disarray. Yet this paradox reveals that ancient thinkers had already begun exploring the fundamental driving force behind all natural phenomena — a core inquiry that continues to resonate today.

2.2 Augustine and Pelagius

The concept of Free Will has been extensively explored in theological discourse. In early Christian history, Augustine clarified the notion of "Free Will" through his seminal work *On Free Will*. This treatise engages in philosophical debate to determine whether human moral character stems from divine endowment or personal willingness. In the chapter "Is God the Cause of Evil?", Augustine contends that while God does not create evil and people cannot acquire it, humanity's wickedness arises from straying from goodness — a fundamental "lack of virtue". He further argues that the primal desire (Libido)⁵ serves as the root of evil, corrupting the "good will." Augustine maintains that both virtuous actions and vices originate from free choice, thus humans' inherently deserve either happiness or misfortune.

It is evident that this raises a fundamental question — If humans and all creation were divinely created with inherent goodness, where would the world's evils originate? Should evil stem from human "Free Will", then the consequences of their sinful choices should logically be borne by themselves. But isn't Free Will itself granted by God? This reasoning appears logically flawed. Augustine argued: "Free Will was given to man to live rightly... without Free Will, neither sin nor good deeds exist; without it, rewards and punishments become unjust."⁶ He maintained that the power of choice is divine, and without this gift, the creation and its workings would lose meaning.

While Free Will might be abused, Augustine believed it remains inherently good. This ancient interpretation reveals profound wisdom. When exploring questions of origin, existence, and destiny, people inevitably must presuppose an Creator. Different schools of thought hold varying positions on whether this Creator continues to influence the lives of beings after creation. Crucially, discussions of these topics must avoid falling into either fatalism or nihilism.

Augustine further elaborated: "When you remain under your own power, you may either avoid unhappiness or incur misfortune through unjustly governing yourself"⁷, for "Man would rather suffer than cease to exist."⁸ Whether humans and all beings are indeed divinely created, the will to freely choose remains the key to survival — This implies that you possess the right to fall into corruption and endure suffering, or more precisely, the right to perceive the inevitable pain.

Pelagius and Augustine lived in the same era, both generally regarded as Christian heretics. He maintained that human will should be free: "If I think it right, I can do it" and opposed "the concept of original sin inherited from Adam, instead asserting that everyone has the capacity to avoid sin."⁹ Regarding worldly evils, Pelagius believed they arose from people blindly following Adam's sins as a model. In their debate about salvation, "Pelagius argued that salvation comes not from divine grace but through human effort, claiming humans could achieve a state of sinlessness. Augustine viewed these positions as fundamentally flawed."¹⁰ Augustine maintained that salvation should be attributed to divine grace.

Early Christian theologians emphasized that if human existence and actions are attributed to a Creator, the Creator must possess omniscience and omnipotence. At first glance, divine omnipotence seems contradictory to human autonomy — Since human nature inherently involves free choice. Without the capacity for moral judgment, there would be no concept of "Goodness", nor would existence in this world embody true "Truth" or "Beauty". If all processes were predetermined by

4. Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, Beijing: Beijing Publishing House, 2012, p. 63.

5. In the translation by Cheng Guanmin, Shanghai Century Publishing Groups "On Free Will: Two Dialogues of Augustine", the word "libido" here does not mean the same thing as the Freudian analysts.

6. Augustine, *On Free Will*, Shanghai: Shanghai Century Publishing Group, p. 100.

7. Augustine, *On Free Will*, Shanghai: Shanghai Century Publishing Group, p. 100.

8. Augustine, *On Free Will*, Shanghai: Shanghai Century Publishing Group, p. 100.

9. Walke, *History of the Christian Church*, Volume I, Guangzhou: Christian Literature Society for China, 1948, p. 278.

10. Walke, *History of the Christian Church*, Volume I, Guangzhou: Christian Literature Society for China, 1948, p. 279.

the Creator, the world would cease to exist as a "world", humanity would lose its essence as human beings, and all existence would become mere illusions.

The fundamental disagreement between Pelagius and Augustine lay in attributing post-sin redemption to humanities own Free Will or the Creator's intervention. Since humans inherently possess Free Will, moral transgression occurs as a consequence of their actions, and redemption must follow suit. This process should be seen as a "subaggregate" of Free Will, with artistic creation often serving this corrective spiritual function. Although Augustine ultimately prevailed over Pelagius in that famous theological debate.

2.3 *Martin Luther and Erasmus*

During the Renaissance, the debate between Martin Luther and Erasmus on Free Will played a pivotal role in shaping Christian doctrine. Luther essentially rejected the notion of Free Will: "I acknowledge that God has granted humanity Free Will. But the fundamental question is: Does this freedom reside within our own power and capacity? People might aptly describe it as a turbulent, chaotic, capricious, and unstable will. For what truly operates within us is God. As for ourselves, people must endure and obey His will."¹¹ Luther argued that original sin deprives humans of genuine Free Will, asserting that humans' determination remains fundamentally shaped by divine will from behind the scenes.

In 1542, Erasmus published his seminal work *On Free Will* (*De Libero Arbitrio*), primarily challenging Luther's denial of Free Will. He defined Free Will as "the power of human determination that enables people to commit to or abandon eternal salvation."¹² While acknowledging God's absolute will, he affirmed human autonomy — a dualistic view of "divine-human harmony". This perspective reveals a fundamental premise: If the Creator created all things according to His Will, He must have granted humans complete decision — making autonomy; otherwise, humans would be no different from stones or clay. Regarding sin and redemption, Erasmus argued that if Human Will were not entirely free, sins could not be attributed to humans, and if will lacked voluntariness, crimes

could not be considered sins. This reasoning holds water: Only when will is fully autonomous does human action carry moral significance. The very distinction between humanity and the Creator's creations lies precisely in this principle.

2.4 *John Locke*

John Locke, hailed as the "Father of Liberalism", articulated in his 1690 treatise *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* chapter Of Power that transformative capacities are termed "automatic capacities", with their most precise conceptualization emerging from the mind. What constitutes will? It is the capacity to initiate or terminate mental or physical actions solely through conscious will, independent of deliberate deliberation. Liberty, Locke asserted, "embodies this voluntary alignment with ones inner convictions"¹³. While recognizing freedom as a prerequisite for decision-making, he maintained that these two concepts are not inherently interdependent. Rejecting the characterization of Will as "free", Locke deemed such inquiry fundamentally flawed: "To question whether human will is free is as meaningless as asking whether sleep is swift or virtue is square... Liberty is merely a power belonging exclusively to the subject, not an attribute or modification of the will itself, which remains fundamentally an act of capacity."¹⁴

Locke posits that Freedom and Will are fundamentally distinct capacities operating on separate planes. This distinction becomes clear when people compare will to potential energy (a vector quantity) and freedom to kinetic energy (a scalar quantity). Will resembles a spring poised for release, while freedom is like a bud ready to bloom. The former can be termed "good will" or "evil will", whereas the latter corresponds to "limited liberty" or "absolute liberty" — In reality, freedom remains inherently constrained — like the absolute liberty envisioned in Zhuang Zi's philosophy, which remains elusive. This very insight reveals Lockes profound wisdom: the concepts of Freedom and Will should never be conflated.

2.5 *Descartes and Spinoza*

People observe that the thought of scholastic philosophy is permeated with the shadow of

11. Zhou Fucheng, *Selected Works of Western Ethics* (Volume I), Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1964, p. 482.

12. Erasmus-Luther, *Discourse On Free Will*, translate by Ernst F. Winter, New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co.Inc, 1961, P20.

13. John Locke, *Human Theory of Understanding*, Beijing: Commercial Press, 1959, p. 208.

14. John Locke, *Human Theory of Understanding*, Beijing: Commercial Press, 1959, p. 211.

Personal God, with its core debate focusing on how Will "operates" under divine grace. Modernist philosophy has achieved significant breakthroughs in discussing the Will. First, Descartes turned his gaze to subjective experience — through "I Think, therefore I Am (ego cogito ergo sum)". The "I Think" serves as evidence for "I Am", rendering the subjectivity of "I" no longer self-evident. Building on this, he deduced God's necessary existence through "perfection" and "infinity" in his Third Meditation. Descartes' concept of "God" still retains traces of scholastic philosophy, embodying omniscience and omnipotence as infinite beings. His doctrine of Free Will addresses the incompatibility between God's perfection and human errors — Positing that our mistakes arise from overusing Free Will. In the Fourth Meditation, Descartes juxtaposes Intellect and Will, corresponding to cognitive ability and judgment respectively. The capacity of Will itself is not the cause of error, as it is "received from God" and "extremely vast, perfect, and magnificent."¹⁵ The crux lies in the contradiction between Will and Cognition: while intellectual knowledge is finite, "The scope of Will surpasses that of intellect; yet I have not imposed similar limitations on Will, but rather expanded its application on things that I can't understand."¹⁶

When describing the characteristics of Free Will, Descartes stated: "The Will is merely the capacity to do or not to do something; or rather, it lies in the tendency of our mind to act when affirming or denying certain things, so that people do not feel governed by any external force."¹⁷ The Free Will defined by Descartes contains two attributes: "indifference" and "spontaneity". These two concepts appear to contain a paradoxical blend, which has sparked considerable debate in academic circles. The former refers to an attitude of doing or not doing, while the latter denotes the inclination to act. Descartes definition indeed touches upon the essential nature of freedom and will. As mentioned earlier, when the concepts of "Freedom" and "Will" are intertwined, a latent possibility (kinetic energy) and a latent tendency (potential energy) coalesce. Such usage might not constitute a logical fallacy, as

seen in artistic activities where these dual characteristics are particularly evident. In his *Principiae Philosophiae*, Descartes further notes that Free Will possesses both self-evident certainty and infinity, allowing humans to intuitively perceive its existence through reason.

Spinoza inherited certain elements from Descartes' philosophy, yet his understanding of "God" completely broke free from the influence of Christian monotheism. In Spinoza's view, "God is entirely synonymous with nature"¹⁸, representing a pantheistic concept. He argued that absolute freedom constitutes God's attribute, which arises precisely from its adherence to the necessity inherent in its own nature. As for individual humans and other entities, they possess no so-called Free Will — Not only at the spiritual level but even in the material realm, phenomena like accidental events and human agency are governed by natural forces, essentially manifestations of necessity. This stems from the premise that "God is the inner cause of all things"¹⁹ and "The human mind is a part of God's infinite intellect"²⁰. In other words, individual's freedom manifests through rational comprehension of necessity and submission to it — What he termed "Rational love for God". However, humans retain relative freedom, meaning they can live by following legal systems through rationality. Spinoza's interpretation of "Will" was clearly influenced by Aristotle, who rationalized "Will" as distinct from the sensory of "Desire". Spinoza's conception of "Will" and "Reason" were inherently intertwined, asserting that any decision-making process must be grounded in rational premises.

2.6 Leibniz

Leibniz, a scholastic philosopher, held the unshakable predestination of God, believing that all future events were already predetermined in divine omniscience. This raises the fundamental question: How does Free will randomness — those seemingly purposeless random choices — connect with causality? In his treatise *New Essays on Human Understanding*, Leibniz challenged John Lockes

15. "In a certain sense, the Will can be said to be infinite, because people see that the object of any man's will, even the object of God's infinite Will, can become the object of our will." — Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1958, pp. 13-14.

16. Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Beijing: Jiuzhou Publishing House, 2007, p. 101.

17. Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Beijing: Jiuzhou Publishing House, 2007, p. 101.

18. Spinoza, *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, Beijing: Commercial Press, 2007, p.28. In Spinoza's philosophy, God is nature. However, this "nature" differs from the natural world people commonly speak of — it encompasses all tangible entities and their underlying vastness, thus constituting the concept of substance in this context.

19. Spinoza, *Ethics*, Beijing: Commercial Press, 2019, p. 21.

20. Spinoza, *Ethics*, Beijing: Commercial Press, 2019, p. 53.

philosophy, arguing that while reason governed by causality could offer "optimal choices" for Human Will, it couldn't enforce them, as volitional tendencies remained inherently contingent. If this is true, how then does Leibniz's doctrine of divine omniscience encompassing absolute necessity hold up? He asserted: "Our will is not only exempt from compulsion but also from necessity."²¹ Even when rational elements influence volitional decisions, the presence of chance must remain, for any decision devoid of contingency becomes an indifferent act — akin to a soulless existence.

The discussion here emphasizes that volitional decisions inherently possess a degree of irrationality. So how exactly does the will exercise its power of choice? Leibniz posited that all things strive for the greatest good in themselves. Regarding the apparent "contradiction" between the contingency of volitional choices and the necessity of God's absolute knowledge, Leibniz argued: "Contingency does not diminish its contingency merely because it is future; and certainty, when recognized, becomes certainty itself — it cannot coexist with contingency."²² Contingency and necessity are like two sides of the same coin, echoing later Nietzsche's "The Dice Throw" metaphor — They are not mutually exclusive; contingency is merely a "subaggregate" of necessity.

Leibniz's doctrine of Freedom is specifically embodied in his "Monadology Theory". A monad is an independent, self-contained, and actively self-determined spiritual entity whose essence lies in perception and desire. The monad itself represents primordial force and motion, forming an infinite sequence of spirit. Thus, at this level, the concept of freedom as "absolute spontaneity unfolds within itself" becomes more comprehensible. Leibniz emphasized the independent Free Will of individuals. In this context, the will as the source of artistic impulse embodies the duality of soul and body. This "Will of Life" often directs actions that deviate from rational analysis, and artistic activities similarly value individual uniqueness.

21. Spinoza observed: "If a person cannot survive or apply reason, people can not claim him to be free. Only when he is able to live and act according to the laws of human nature can he be considered free." — Spinoza, *Tractatus Politicus*, Beijing: Commercial Press, 1997, p. 184.

22. Leibniz, *The Doctrine of God and Man*, Beijing: Commercial Press, 2016, p. 211.

3. CLASSICAL: KANT AND HEGEL

3.1 Kant

Kant identified two supreme ideals: "The starry heavens above me and the moral law within my heart." He categorized human capacities into three types: cognition, feeling, and will. Kant posited that humans inhabit a dual realm — the sensuous world governed by feeling capacities and the rational world governed by "cognition (pure reason)" and "will (practical reason)." In the natural world, all beings must obey natural laws and thus lack freedom. However, in practical matters, humans exercise autonomous will — where beings do not base their decisions solely on reason but follow their own behavioral principles (autonomy), thereby attaining freedom. Kant argued that true Free Will means acting according to self-legislated standards when making practical choices, transcending natural laws and physical instincts while resisting emotional impulses.²³ His concept of "Free Will" serves as a practical guideline for rational action, emphasizing that the "Will of Life" guided by the principle of desire prioritizes autonomy as its fundamental rule. As an artistic impulse, the life will primarily operates through desire — specifically, what Kant termed "pleasure (Angenehm)"²⁴.

In *Critique of Judgment*, Kant proposes two types of "Beauty": the beauty of freedom (*pulchritudo*) and the beauty of adherence (*pulchritudo adhaerens*). The former "means nothing, nor does it signify anything"; it "does not belong to any object defined conceptually in its purpose, but rather freely and self-gives pleasure to the individual."²⁵ Kant considers themeless fantasias and music without lyrics as examples of this category. This demonstrates that the notion of

23. "The will is a capacity that selects only what practical reason considers necessary and good, when free from the influence of passions." — Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Shanghai: Century Publishing Group, 2012, p.23.

24. "In practice, the highest good is determined by rational concepts guiding human will, but not through subjective motives rather than objective ones... Unlike pleasure — which arises from subjective reasons perceived by individuals through sensory experiences influencing their will — this principle operates independently of rational principles." — Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Shanghai: Century Publishing Group, 2012, p.24.

25. Felix Maria Gatz, *On Music and Musical Beauty of German and Austrian Celebrities*, Beijing: People's Music Publishing House, 2015, p. 74.

"Musical Beauty" aligns with the idea that music embodies Free Will.

3.2 Hegel

In the introduction to *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel's exploration of Free Will centers on his conception of will as the foundational element of law, asserting that freedom is an unquestionable predetermined attribute of will.²⁶ He distinguishes between thought and will: "The difference between thought and will essentially lies in the distinction between theoretical and practical attitudes. They are not separate faculties; rather, will constitutes a specific mode of thinking — one that transforms itself into inherent existence through the impulse to establish its own determinacy."²⁷ Hegel maintains that rationality inherently permeates practical acts, yet these acts manifest as a "separation" where the "I" defines distinctions — What belongs to me and what does not. As I grasp certain things while relinquishing others, I simultaneously define my own identity. Hegel draws a parallel between human mental activities and animal behavior: Animals live by instinct, which constitutes practical action, but not guided by the principle of will — the core being "They cannot represent what they desire."²⁸

In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel explored how consciousness functions. He argued: "Human desires perpetuate conflict among people, seeking self-affirmation through the destruction of others."²⁹ Desires cannot be satisfied independently but require mediation through "the other," finding fulfillment only in recognition of the others self-consciousness. Thus, "The consciousness of master-slave relations arises when the master, as a subject, gains recognition through their dominant position without eliminating others. The master's

consciousness becomes self-contained, independent, and self-determined, while the slave's consciousness transforms into dependent consciousness."³⁰ This perspective suggests consciousness originates from a feedback loop of desire projection, where master-slave consciousness can mutually transform. While sharing similarities with Nietzsche's concept of "The Master Will". Hegel's later theory of legal freedom represents an improvement on master-slave consciousness, adding a political dimension to human subjectivity.

In *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel outlines three developmental stages of Free Will. 1. "Pure Unconditioned Phase": The Will first seeks to transcend all determinations, striving to emerge through self-reflection: "In this reflection, all limitations — those inherent in nature, needs, desires, and impulses that exist directly or through them, those given and determined are dissolved."³¹ This represents a state of "pure self", where the "self" possesses infinite expansiveness. The "I" yearns to break free from all constraints and particularities, marking the starting point of Free Will. However, this is an abstract and hollow form of Will. Such freedom carries destructive potential, essentially constituting a purposeless state. When applied to real life, it may manifest as extreme liberalism or anarchism, leading Hegel to describe it as "destructive waves" — a force requiring sublation and further development. 2. "Self-Specification Phase": This transitional stage involves the self's evolution from "undifferentiated unconditionedness toward distinguishing, determining, and establishing determinations... either bestowed by nature or arising from the concept of spirit. By defining itself as a determinate entity, the self enters the realm of universal being."³² This marks the shift from "destruction" to "establishment", the process of making a free choice by Will must go through a process of eliminating distractions and interferences, and then a process of special selection, from being "unlimited" to "limited". 3. The unity of the two phases above: "self-reflection through which one returns to the particularity within universality — that is, singularity. This constitutes the self-

26. "The foundation of law is fundamentally spiritual in nature, with its closest connection and starting point being the will. Since the will is free, freedom constitutes the essence and defining characteristic of law. As for how the legal system realizes this realm of freedom... The concept of free will should ideally be explained through the principles of physical nature. In other words, freedom is the fundamental attribute of the will, just as gravity is the essential property of objects." — Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2016, p.34.

27. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2016, p. 35.

28. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2016, p. 36.

29. Feng Chuan, *A Study on the Moral Philosophy of Hegel's Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2013, p. 44.

30. Feng Chuan, *A Study on the Moral Philosophy of Hegel's Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2013, p. 44.

31. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Beijing: Peoples Publishing House, 2016, p. 38.

32. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Beijing: Peoples Publishing House, 2016, p. 40.

determination of the self."³³ This represents true freedom of Will. While Hegel's framework demonstrates evident wisdom, his dialectical thinking appears somewhat dogmatic. Not all complex worldly issues can be conclusively resolved through such generalized triadic models.

Kant and Hegel meticulously demonstrated the decision-making process of Will through complex reasoning, yet both deliberately avoided addressing the relationship between rationality and desire in Will action (as Kant noted, when following the "happiness principle", does this not inherently contain irrational elements?). Human willing behavior cannot be entirely divorced from either reason or desire — Will is neither an emotionless computational machine nor a primitive animal acting on instinct. Rationalist philosophers oversimplified the distinction between emotion and willpower, while Chinese philosophy has long recognized the concept of "disposition (emotion and will)". Ancient Chinese scholars had already discerned the intricate entanglement between emotion and intention, which constitutes the most subtle aspect of human nature. Art, as a tangible existence, explores precisely this subtlety.

4. SCHOPENHAUER

Schopenhauer, a pioneer of irrationalism, developed a unique interpretation of "Will" that diverged from conventional understandings. His philosophy constituted both an inheritance and critique of Kantian thought: "My philosophical framework originates from Kants foundational concepts."³⁴ Schopenhauer posited that all perceptible entities are not the actual objects themselves but rather manifestations within the empirical world — "The entire realm dependent on cognition exists as subject-related objects — intuitive perceptions of the perceiver, constituting mere representations."³⁵ This conceptualization emphasizes that representation constitutes the "subjects" cognitive process, paralleling the Zen Buddhist concept of "Manas-vijnana", which serves as the root of selection, judgment, and reasoning, embodying the manifestation of subjective

consciousness. Schopenhauer's assertion that the world's essence is Will, which clearly derives from Kant's doctrine of "Things-in-itself."

What does Schopenhauer's "Will" signify? It represents "the unknowable inner essence of bodily activities and actions... the intrinsic driving force behind behavior and conduct... In a sense, the Will constitutes the transcendental understanding of the body, while the body itself becomes the empirical manifestation of the Will."³⁶ This reveals Schopenhauer's identification of the Will as the fundamental driving force of human behavior, with his assertion that "My body and my Will are identical."³⁷ For instance, the pain caused by willpower and the act of tearing eyes are not causally related but fundamentally one and the same. This principle is particularly evident in artistic experiences: when listening to moving music or watching compelling films, tears spontaneously flow — indicating fluctuations in the Will that correspond to physical expressions. Thus, "Sensory organs also constitute one aspect of the wills objectivity."³⁸ While an infant's birth cry primarily manifests as a directed expression of Will of Life, followed by physiological feedback regulation, Schopenhauer's system posits that physiological activities originate from the Will itself. How does the subject differentiate between the "body" as an external representation and other representations? The key lies in the Will — the dual cognition of our bodies through both consciousness and will.³⁹

Schopenhauer then expanded the concept of Will — "I consider all forces in nature as Will."⁴⁰ He extended the scope of this concept to encompass the entire world, equating "Will" with what Kant

33. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Beijing: Peoples Publishing House, 2016, p. 43.

34. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Beijing: China Overseas Chinese Publishing House Co., Ltd., 2017, p. 12.

35. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Beijing: China Overseas Chinese Publishing House Co., Ltd., 2017, p. 3.

36. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Beijing: China Overseas Chinese Publishing House Co., Ltd., 2017, pp. 78-79.

37. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Beijing: China Overseas Chinese Publishing House Co., Ltd., 2017, p. 80.

38. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Beijing: China Overseas Chinese Publishing House Co., Ltd., 2017, p. 79.

39. "Among all objects, only it is both will and representation, while others are merely representations and illusions. In other words, his body is the world's unique authentic entity — the sole manifestation of will and the subject's direct object." — Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Beijing: China Overseas Chinese Publishing House Co., Ltd., 2017, pp. 81-82.

40. "It can also be said that the use of the best-naming method here has expanded the scope of the concept of will to an unprecedented extent." — Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Beijing: China Overseas Chinese Publishing House Co., Ltd., 2017, pp. 87-88.

called the "Thing-in-itself" — an a priori entity existing independently. "Will is both the actual existence of all things in the world and the sole intrinsic essence of every phenomenon."⁴¹ Since phenomena are governed by Will, what's the laws of it? — The notion of Will lacks foundation. This connection most readily relates to artistic phenomena: why is arts value so elusive and mysterious? Precisely because art manifests Will through more direct channels, defying the causal laws of the phenomenal world. Among worldly phenomena, some are emerge from Will's multi-step transformations. This procedural complexity creates appearances of causality — like when applying specific fertilizer to an apple tree, yielding plump fruits — Both the fruit and the fertilizer are refined products of Will, processed through multiple stages, thus partially conforming to causal laws.

This principle also applies across different art forms: Architectural and craft arts demonstrate significantly higher causal elements than musical arts. This can be explained in two aspects: Firstly, they incorporate more utilitarian practical considerations. Secondly, their primary materials are material substances — such as cement bricks, steel bars, and ceramics. The subsequent processing and assembly of these tangible components naturally align with the law of causality, as "phenomena must adhere to the laws governing the formation of their manifestations."⁴²

Schopenhauer deliberately avoids equating "Will" with "Freedom," asserting that "The will is not merely free but utterly omnipotent... Its mode of being, its conduct, and the world it inhabits are all manifested through this principle."⁴³ He contends that the Will transcends notions of Freedom or constraint, serving as the ultimate governing force in the phenomenal world. People cannot describe it with terms like "freedom" or "self-discipline" — if people must define its nature — "The Will, when considered in itself, lacks cognition; it is merely an uncontrollable impulse of blind impulse."⁴⁴

41. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Beijing: China Overseas Chinese Publishing House Co., Ltd., 2017, pp. 88-90.

42. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Beijing: China Overseas Chinese Publishing House Co., Ltd., 2017, p. 110.

43. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Beijing: China Overseas Chinese Publishing House Co., Ltd., 2017, pp. 227-228.

44. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Beijing: China Overseas Chinese Publishing House Co., Ltd., 2017, p. 230.

Existing linguistic frameworks prove inadequate for characterizing this supreme dimension. If people must define it, perhaps only the concept of "Time" might suffice. Yet Schopenhauer further states: "While individual manifestations of the Will begin and end within Time, the Will itself, as an absolute entity, remains unrelated to temporal boundaries... As an absolute entity, it inherently possesses infinite duration without temporal limitations."⁴⁵ While this assertion invites skepticism, given our inability to verify our own understanding of the nature of Will beyond its phenomenal existence, people may provisionally label its essence as "infinite".

5. NIETZSCHE

Nietzsche inherited Schopenhauer's philosophy of Will to some extent, with his academic focus primarily centered on the "Will to Power (Wille zur Macht)". The concept of "Will to Power" can be traced back to the Dionysian spirit in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche believed that the essence of tragedy lies in Dionysus, the God of wine, who wandering across stages wearing various masks. He used Dionysus as a symbol for music and tragic art, "not based on orthodox Olympian mythology, but on the legends of folk Dionysian rituals after Homer."⁴⁶ In Greek mythology, Apollo and the Muses presided over music and poetry, while Nietzsche directly equated the Dionysian spirit with these arts. This interpretation seems more fitting than the ancient Greeks' simplistic construction of tragic concepts. The essence of Dionysus is "intoxication," but Nietzsche emphasized that this "intoxication" is metaphorical rather than literal, and should not be scientifically interpreted as "physiological intoxication". True intoxication is "a great shock" combined with "the ecstatic joy rising from humanity's most fundamental nature when the principle of individuation collapses."⁴⁷ The Apollonian spirit manifests as the beauty of phenomena under its halo, serene and dreamlike; the Dionysian spirit, however, is dynamic — enthusiastic singing, wild exuberance, and eccentricity. The Dionysian spirit emphasizes the inner wildness and fighting spirit of life, which is the embryonic form of the will to power.

45. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Beijing: China Overseas Chinese Publishing House Co., Ltd., 2017, p. 237.

46. Frederic Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2014, p. 10.

47. Frederic Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2014, p. 12.

In Nietzsche and Philosophy, Deleuze observes: "The suffering of Dionysus is identical to that of Christ."⁴⁸ Yet Christianity's logic shackles the human heart with an innate guilt, demanding lifelong atonement and gratitude toward God. Dionysus, however, embraces life with a defiant spirit — "life needs no justification"⁴⁹ — contrasting sharply with Christianity's path of self-restraint. "The opposition between Dionysus and Christ gradually evolved into an affirmation (extreme glorification of life) versus a negation (extreme denigration of life)."⁵⁰ In *The Birth of Tragedy*, the wine god Dionysus first appears as a prototype of the "Overman", though not fully developed. Later in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, and *The Will to Power*, this image of the Overman becomes increasingly sophisticated.

The Overman embodies "those tormented by life's excessive abundance", whose body pulsates with an overwhelming Will to Power, enabling unimpeded action. He roams and runs ceaselessly. Nietzsche's doctrine largely inherits Schopenhauer's theory of the Will as an ontological force, though their divergence lies in distinct perspectives. Schopenhauer emphasized the unity of Will consistency: "In his view, precisely because the Will is fundamentally monistic, the executioner Will ultimately realize he shares the same fate as his guillotine victim."⁵¹ This unity-driven Will inevitably falls into self-negation. Nietzsche, however, advocates a "power genealogy" structure: "Nietzsche's concept of power involves interconnections between forces... The core issue... resides in the relationship between the will to dominate and the will to obey."⁵² The Will to Power centers on clashes and struggles between opposing forces, culminating in the *Übermensch*, whose power is always on the verge of overflowing due to its excessive abundance. "Therefore, the Will to Power is the genealogical factor of force."⁵³

The Will to Power, defined as "An attempt to reevaluate all values"⁵⁴ within the context of real society, seeks to establish a new morality grounded in mechanical principles. This doctrine opposes traditional divine authority and suppressive practices that deny life's primal drive, instead advocating for an "extreme spirit of freedom"⁵⁵ — a state of "transcending oneself (*Über-sich-hinaus*)"⁵⁶. This concept signifies that "the Will does not merely transcend itself, but integrates itself into the Will"⁵⁷.

In Nietzsche's system of the Will to Power, music occupies a uniquely elevated position: "Only Schopenhauer recognized music's distinct nature and origin from other arts. The singular principle of beauty in traditional aesthetics cannot explain music or tragedy."⁵⁸ Schopenhauer argued that music differs fundamentally from phenomena in the world — it is the most direct manifestation of the Will, serving as its linguistic expression. This perspective aligns with the Dionysian spirit, which symbolizes an inflated, wildly unrestrained vitality. The art form most directly associated with Dionysus is music — For music embodies nothing but the passionate surge of life itself; it neither imitates others nor constructs concepts. In essence, it represents "existence itself" rather than any mere existence.

6. CONCLUSION

With the emergence of Nietzsche, the systematic exploration of "Will" in Western philosophy came to a temporary conclusion. It signifies a fundamental paradigm shift in continental European philosophical research since Nietzsche's time. The discourse on Will has maintained pioneering significance across social ethics, artistic styles, and related domains. Following Nietzsche, philosophers, sociologists, and artists have continued exploring this primordial theme through increasingly divergent approaches. This paper provides a concise overview of representative doctrines from ancient to modern times, while suggesting future research could focus

48. Gil Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Zhengzhou: Henan University Press, 2016, p. 30.

49. Gil Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Zhengzhou: Henan University Press, 2016, p. 33.

50. Gil Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Zhengzhou: Henan University Press, 2016, p. 33.

51. Gil Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Zhengzhou: Henan University Press, 2016, pp. 14-15.

52. Gil Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Zhengzhou: Henan University Press, 2016, p. 14.

53. Gil Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Zhengzhou: Henan University Press, 2016, p. 108.

54. Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2018, p. 129.

55. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Beijing: China Overseas Chinese Publishing House, 2020, p. 66.

56. Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche (Volume I)*, Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2003, p. 48.

57. Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche (Volume I)*, Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2003, p. 54.

58. Frederic Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2014, p. 103.

on contemporary philosophical frontiers and offer fresh interpretations.

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