

Augustine, Desire, and the Moral Significance of Preferences

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1 Introduction

Frigid Farrah” is one of the more recent additions to a growing industry of sex robots (Bates, 2017). Unlike other robots, though, Farrah comes equipped with an unusual, and alarming, feature: She can be raped. Users can adjust the settings of the robot’s eagerness, or lack thereof, for sexual activity, up to and including a setting where it will attempt to resist sexual advances by the owner. In addition to Farrah, other similar dolls are being created with low or “frigid” consent settings—providing a user with a sexual assault experience.¹

In terms of production and demand, consumer products like “Farrah” are startling. Yet when it comes to unsavory goods and services in the market, sex robots are hardly alone. Cheating services such as “AshleyMadison.com” or “Wetakeyourclass.com” facilitate adulterous affairs for those seeking marital infidelity or provide surrogate online test-takers for less-than-motivated students. “Bum Fights” are home videos of paid street fights among the homeless; video games such as “Grand Theft Auto” encourage mindless torture and the degradation of women; and clothing companies such as “Pink” overtly sexualize pre-adolescent females. One could talk further about preferences for racist paraphernalia, blockbuster movie violence, dog-fighting, polarizing social media outlets, reality-escaping digital apps, segregated school districts, romance novels, pornographic material, or opioids. The availability of such goods and services reflects a range of appetites from the unwholesome to the anti-social.

Yet what, we might ask, is morally objectionable about the preference for, and consumption of, such goods and services? Intuitively, when we satisfy people’s tastes and preferences, we assume they are made better off. People have differing desires, beliefs, values, and judgments. There-

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fore, the satisfaction we derive from consumption—it is suggested—is in the eye of the beholder. Such experiences vary from individual to individual and, moreover, cannot be adequately measured across persons in a uniform manner. Our heterogeneous pursuits do, however, reflect a commonality. Specifically, the variation in human behavior can be explained by simple, yet key, economic principles. Economist David Colander (2017) wrote: “[T]wo things determine what people do: utility—the *pleasure or satisfaction people get from doing or consuming something*, and the price of doing or consuming that something.”²

Over a century ago, Economist Richard Ely (1912) similarly defined utility as “anything that is capable of satisfying a human want.” The notion of utility as an abstract measure of “satisfaction” is common. However, Ely makes an important distinction:

We need here to guard against a misunderstanding which the word “utility” sometimes suggests. There is a tendency to confound it with the idea of benefit, and to suppose that articles are useful just in proportion as they are beneficial. But in economics these two ideas cannot be taken as identical. Utility is the power to satisfy wants, not the power to confer benefits. Cigars are as useful in the economic sense as bread or books, for all three satisfy wants. Economic wants may be serious, frivolous, or even positively pernicious, but the objects of these wants are all alike “utilities” in the economic sense. (p. 95)

A century later, much has changed in the field of economics. However, Ely’s differentiation between utility as a mechanism to satisfy wants and utility as a means to human flourishing (“benefits”) remains an important distinction. Moreover, economics as a field continues to be concerned with fulfilling the preferences that supposedly provide us utility with admittedly less inquiry into the *nature* of the preferences it aims to satisfy. Harvard’s Michael Sandel (2012) states the issue well: “The price system allocates goods according to people’s preferences; it doesn’t assess those preferences as worthy or admirable or appropriate to the circumstance” (p. 48). This makes sense if the preference bundle consists of innocuous choices between movies and concerts, trucks and sedans, or tea and coffee—morally neutral choices that tend to find their way into economics textbooks. However, not all preferences share this attribute. Indeed, as Ely makes clear, some are “positively pernicious”—implying

a moral dimension to the goods from which we derive our utility (e.g., “Frigid Farrah”). The result? “[E]conomists increasingly find themselves entangled in moral questions” (Sandel, 2012).

To be clear, economics, proper, is not moral philosophy. While this is true in a formal sense, economists cannot take preferences as evidence of what is good for people unless they have a clear notion as to what *good* means (Hausman & McPherson, 2009, p. 18). This, however, is a complicated task and naturally requires philosophical recruitment beyond the boundaries outlined in traditional economic discourse. In addition to other proxies, the satisfaction of our preferences has been one way of measuring individual and social welfare and well-being. I do not here intend to argue for the abandonment of this practice. Moreover, neither will I argue to replace the markets that facilitate our goods and services irrespective of their moral character. Rather, this paper aims to give greater attention to the moral nature of our preferences and the associated implications for dialogue within the discipline—specifically for those who share Judeo-Christian faith commitments. When it comes to understanding desire, the faith tradition provides a rich history from which to draw—particularly in the work of St. Augustine. Where economics directly or indirectly speaks to desire, welfare, and human aim, the interplay between the disciplines helps to address significant philosophical gaps, particularly for those who subscribe to the Christian faith tradition.

2 Preference Satisfaction, Welfare, and Efficiency

Microeconomic theory has concerned itself with how agents make choices under conditions of scarcity. As mentioned, rational actors choose among alternatives, and their judgments relate to expected utility conditioned upon their knowledge, belief, and constraints. With this paradigm in mind, it is entirely reasonable to associate choice with welfare (Hausman & McPherson, 2009, p. 5). In the late 19th Century, Economist Francis Edgeworth demonstrated that, in assuming self-interested economic agency, such an assumption would lend itself to maximizing the satisfaction of preferences. While challenged in many respects,³ the economic impulse to link welfare to preference satisfaction endures to this day (Hausman & McPherson, 2009, p. 4). Cut from the cloth of consequentialism, this notion asserts that creating the conditions that best allow agents to satisfy their preferences will be intricately linked with

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iterative enhancements to individual welfare and well-being.⁴ Put differently, “the way to improve someone’s life is to make her more able to get what she wants” (Maser, Bronsteen, & Buccafusco, 2010, p. 1585).

Marginal utility, the satisfaction or benefit realized through the consumption of one additional good or service, has an extensive history.⁵ Beginning in the late 19th Century, neoclassical economists modernized utility theory to incorporate both the principles of utility and scarcity, thus creating the notion of marginal utility. Among other advances in economics during this period was the distinction between cardinal and ordinal utility. Utility is difficult, if not impossible, to measure across persons—making a cardinal measure both unscientific and unrealizable since “Utility is not a *thing*, but a *relation* between a person and a thing” (Kauder, 2015, p. 82, italics his). Among early critics of cardinal utility was Italian Economist Vilfred Pareto. Pareto asserted that it is not necessary to quantify a good’s utility and that ranking preference bundles is sufficient for consumer theory and its predictive capacity. The optimal bundle is the bundle that, given our constraints, we would prefer (i.e., is ordered highest). Moreover, this logically implies that our preferences can be equated with utility. Hausman (1993) wrote: “The ordinal representation theorem states that if an individual’s preferences are complete, transitive, and continuous, then they may be represented by a continuous real-valued utility function. To be a utility maximizer is merely to choose the available option one most prefers” (p. 680).⁶

In addition to the neoclassical distinction between cardinal and ordinal utility, Pareto provided a target measure for efficiency, or what has become known as the Pareto criterion. This suggests that the satisfaction of our tastes (or preferences) through exchange will eventually lead to the optimum state where no one person can be made better off without making someone else worse off (Pareto optimality).

Today, the Pareto criterion has come to be the dominant measure of achieving efficiency in economics. Efficiency is significant because interpersonal utility cannot be measured (what brings satisfaction to me may differ from what brings satisfaction to you). Second, because interpersonal utility cannot be measured, we can assume that people rank the options before them and choose the alternative that would bring about the most utility given their constraints (ordinal utility function). Finally, then, if (1) utility is subjective to each individual, (2) individuals rank their decisions in a way so as to maximize their own personal utility, and (3)

we cannot compare utility across persons, then it stands to reason that the best arrangement is the one in which individuals are free to express their preferences through unencumbered market exchange (leading to an “efficient” outcome).

This is an important insight. If we want to enhance welfare, and welfare relates to the satisfaction of our preferences, then it is necessary to inquire as to the conditions by which to maximize preference satisfaction. Specifically, voluntary trade occurring through the free market arrangement allows consumers and producers to self-select into trade agreements. Rational, bi-laterally informed market participants would not voluntarily enter into an exchange unless it was mutually beneficial. Thus, markets facilitate the creation of value by exhausting gains through trade, or the “welfare maximizing outcome” (Cowen, 1993, p. 253). Put differently—in the absence of power or information asymmetries, and assuming minimal third-party externalities—markets churn Pareto efficient equilibria through the production and consumption of goods and services while maximizing social surplus. Moreover, market mechanisms produce a natural price for the various products and services they facilitate, and this price communicates important information and coordinates productive and innovative economic activity toward its most efficacious ends.

Consumer desire is heterogeneous, allowing for a plurality of valuation. Not only is the market mechanism dynamic enough to accommodate consumer preference pluralism, it is equally sufficient to satisfy the variety of tastes and appetites of its inhabitants. In sum: If welfare is preference satisfaction, then markets exist as the superior economic arrangement for accommodating consumer preference and, thus, enhancing—even maximizing—collective welfare.

3 Are All Preferences Created Equal?

The assumption that the optimal arrangement is the one in which individual preferences are satisfied given constraints might lead one to naturally equate preference satisfaction with value judgments as to what is “good.” Indeed, utility functions reflect what is important to us (including what we prioritize based upon reasoning). This does not escape the reality that what is important to one agent will inevitably differ from what is important to another agent. Hausman and McPherson (2009) wrote:

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On the preference satisfaction view, one makes Ann better off by satisfying her preferences regardless of how idiosyncratic or obnoxious they are and regardless of how they were formed. If welfare is what matters to social policy, then social policy should be insensitive to the character and origins of preferences. (pp. 7–8)

Under current economic theory, the “character and origins” of our preferences are mere personal value judgments. Indeed, subjective valuations have long been central to post-classical economic theory. Consider, for example, Austrian Economist Murray Rothbard’s (2011) words over a half-century ago: “Individual valuation is the keystone of economic theory. . . . Action is the result of choice among alternatives, and choice reflects values, that is, individual preferences among these alternatives” (p. 289).⁷ For this reason, Rothbard concludes that “Individual valuations are the direct subject matter of the theories of utility and of welfare.”⁸

This conception, while entirely reasonable within the economic discipline, is animated by implicit philosophical judgments that should strike those with Christian sensibilities as limited. First, by giving primacy to individual valuation and choice, the welfare as preference satisfaction assumption valorizes choice as its own virtue (as opposed to a choice being “virtuous” based upon the object chosen). Subjective valuation may be a keystone of economic theory, but it is anathema to a Christian understanding of choice, will, and desire. As Rodney Clapp (2004) wrote, “For Christian spirituality, desire can never be considered apart from its object. A desire is known as ‘good’ or ‘evil’ only when we take account of what is desired—the object of desire” (p. 78). While we are endowed with the capacity to choose, our fulfillment is intricately bound up in communion with our creator. That is, in matters of true human fulfillment and realization, some choices return void while others do not.

Related, and put crudely, the preference satisfaction model assumes that welfare is constituted by giving an agent what they want. While this may be debatable in terms of behavioral economics (implicit bias, actions inconsistent with desires, etc.), this assumption can also be disputed on moral and theological grounds. Where preferences cohere with desires, it would be harmful to satiate base desires that are degrading, or further, that might prohibit or contaminate my pursuit or realization of human purpose and teleology. The goods and services that bring pleasure may

vary among the masses. Yet if humans were designed by a deliberate designer, then what allows a human to truly flourish does not.⁹

Third, and also related, equating welfare to preference satisfaction posits freedom, but of a certain kind. Specifically, this is freedom to do what I like, which is different from freedom—or we might even say *capacity*—to do what I ought.¹⁰ Freedom presumes a kind of character. That is, we would not wish to grant greater liberties to those with base impulses or harmful proclivities. Thus, the theology of original sin—the spiritual reality of a sinful human disposition apart from God’s redemptive work—leaves the appeal to unqualified freedom as, at best, questionable. If liberty is merely unencumbered human activity, then more capacity may be more fodder for harm. As Theologian Stanley Hauerwas (1988) has written: “a good doctor is also a good poisoner” (p. 245). To be clear, freedom of choice and action is a necessary antecedent to moral growth (i.e., choosing the good). Without choice, moral action has no animus. Yet freedom, understood in the faith tradition, is not simply an end, but a means to a certain kind of end. So while liberty is a necessary condition, it is insufficient in itself for moral and spiritual realization.

Finally, we may give attention to the notion of welfare itself. If we consider welfare in its biblical sense, that is, the condition of being complete, full, and whole—*shalom*—then (simply) satisfying preferences is a curious approach by which to fulfill such an end. Such peace and wholeness relate to human satiation and satisfaction. But what satisfies? Hausman and McPherson (2009) raise the point well: “There is only this contingent connection between the satisfaction of a preference and the satisfaction of a person” (p. 10).

While different in content, these objections to the welfare-as-preference-satisfaction assumption share a common trait. Specifically, they recognize the Judeo-Christian conviction that preference, desire, choice, and human aim—while understood and expressed diversely in pluralistic societies—are inescapably linked to human purpose and, thus, human flourishing. Insofar as the goods and services consumed have a moral significance—as humans that exist in a moral reality—we cannot escape the laws of such a reality (endowed ontology and teleology) any more than we could escape the laws of a physical reality (e.g., gravity).

Recognizing this reality, Philosopher Peter Kreeft (2015) has helpfully suggested that beauty is not in the eye of the beholder, but it is in the power of the beholder’s eye to see beauty. That is, our lives do not

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necessarily go well when we create the moral reality around us; they go well when we appropriately understand and function within created order. If there is an essence to human beings, and an essence to the reality around us, then welfare and well-being are intimately tied to the pursuit, apprehension, and embodiment of the Creator's design for his creation. With this conception in mind, we are invited to re-evaluate the notion of welfare as the satisfaction of preferences, since markets facilitate preferences that have a clear moral significance. William Cavanaugh (2008) wrote:

The key question in every transaction is whether or not the transaction contributes to the flourishing of each person involved, and this question can only be judged, from a theological point of view, according to the end of human life, which is participation in the life of God. (p. viii)

4 Virtue and Public Consensus

Before moving forward, there is good reason for caution. The recognition that some desires are more morally appropriate than others naturally raises the question: What should one prefer? Justifiably, this is territory that economists are unlikely to traverse. Indeed, the posture of preference-neutrality coheres with the widely-held perspective that economics is a value-free science. Moreover, given the incommensurability of moral and ethical beliefs held by members across society, it would seem unrealistic to assume that a generalized hierarchy of preferences could be established. It is perhaps even more unrealistic to assume that such a hierarchy would originate from economists.

Ultimately, the project of conferring a moral status to our individual preferences appears, at first glance, utopian and naïve. Though many will concede that some preferences are more morally appropriate than others, it would be difficult to define the *right* preference(s) and even more difficult to coerce their pursuit. It would require that we can uniformly value something appropriately, which equally assumes that we can value something inappropriately, or the “wrong way”—a common suggestion from Harvard's Michael Sandel.¹¹ Economists are likely to quibble with this idea, though. The work of economists is often descriptive, having little to say about the end-states they seek to bring about.

Robert and Edward Skidelsky (2012) state the issue well: “Economists are all for the *satisfaction* of wants, at least within certain limits. But as to the wants themselves, they maintain a fastidious indifference” (p. 88).¹² A more blunt expression comes from Economist Jodi Beggs (2012). In her “imagined yet realistic conversation” with Sandel, she responds: “Who in the hell are you to tell people what they ‘should’ be valuing? Some economists may try to account for tastes, but none of us are presumptuous enough to tell anyone what their tastes should be.”

This response is not without merit. Philosopher Michael Philips (2001) has outlined the attractiveness of utility theory, specifically noting that preference satisfaction is a good “default view” in the absence of “any alleged realm of ordered, absolute value.” In addition to the challenges of achieving consensus when attempting to identify a cardinal list of virtues worthy of pursuit, creating a list of absolute virtues risks a form of moral condescension (as Beggs’ comment suggests), which is likely to reinforce the futility of such an endeavor. More to the point: While it is impossible to offer a depiction of the good that everyone would agree on, we can confidently assert that “Everyone wants their preferences satisfied” (Philips, 2001).

Furthermore, wrote Philips, this approach is democratic, and avoids the potential “paternalistic despotisms” that would obtain should a person, agency, or state enforce or mandate certain preferences, thereby limiting freedom and human activity (Philips, 2001). Indeed, appeals to virtue or an objective list of primary goods are often accompanied by interventionist responses. For example, in an interview with Michael Sandel on properly valuing the excellence inherent in certain goods, and specifically, a Stradivarius Violin, Sandel was asked if he would make a law that would directly link such a rare instrument with the world’s great violinists. In Artistotelian terms, the virtues inherent in the instrument are best realized when proportionally yoked to the world’s best violinists (as opposed to market distribution, which may put the instrument into the hands of wealthy, yet untalented violinists). Sandel responded:

[I]f it became a persisting problem, that the great Stradivarius violins were being bought up by private collectors, I might favor some policies that would subsidize the purchase of Stradivarius violins to make them available to great violinists who would perform with them. (Warburton, 2011)

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For many, this line of reasoning will be met with discomfort. The association of virtue with state action invites a dangerous euphemism, one that cloaks power within notions of goodness, wisdom, and beauty. For this reason, historian Niall Ferguson responded to Sandel's vision of virtue with the following: "I just see Robespierre every time you use that word [Virtue]. At the bottom of republican virtues you send people to the guillotine" (Ireland, 2009). Throughout history, moving a social unit toward a singular end has invited an overly paternalistic regiment of planned social and economic engineering (the kind often inimical to a liberal democracy). It was Hayek (2007) who stated: "That our present society lacks such 'conscious' direction toward a single aim, that its activities are guided by the whims and fancies of irresponsible individuals, has always been one of the main complaints of its socialist critics" (p. 100). However, in response, he wrote: "But they all differ from liberalism and individualism in wanting to organize the whole of society and all its resources for this unitary end and in refusing to recognize autonomous spheres in which the ends of the individual are supreme."

In contrast, the *preference democracy* view advanced by Philips supports our pursuit of the goods we prefer, whatever their moral significance may be. Debra Satz (2010) wrote:

[F]reedom is better served by giving individuals income and letting them decide which of their preferences they themselves wish to satisfy. The government fails to treat its citizens with respect when it seeks to determine which of their individual goals, health care or music lessons, is most worthy of pursuit, regardless of the goals that these citizens themselves prefer. (p. 64)

As Satz implies, if we accept that some conceptions of the good are superior to others, and moreover, that certain virtues are worthy of our pursuit (at the expense of others), then residual concerns arise. Whose virtues? Who will enforce their pursuit? Disfigurations of "virtue" and its imposition have led many, such as Isaiah Berlin (1969), to famously conclude that negative liberty and pluralism remain "a truer and more humane ideal" (p. 31).

Moreover, market structures (and the negative and positive liberties they reinforce) are not merely mechanisms for welfare enhancement. They are engines for economic growth, development, value, and innovation. Economist Steve Horwitz has helpfully noted that when he speaks

to those who are skeptical of markets, he points out that no other system has achieved growth and output per person in human history like free-market capitalism. However, he also has a response for those who like markets but don't like the cultural change that comes with them: "You can't put that toothpaste back in the tube." He continues, "Once you've unleashed the dynamism of the marketplace, you're going to get dynamic cultural change" (Gillespie, 2012).

To the extent that these descriptions mirror our current social, political, moral, and economic reality, we see a dilemma arise. Do we accept preference satisfaction as welfare, and the dynamic cultural change that accompanies the free market arrangement, or do we seek interventionist strategies and risk the despotisms that such correctives attract?

For the person of faith, how might we change the dialogue? That is, what would it mean for the Christian to reject one vice without accepting the other?

5 Augustine and "Ordered Love"

The choice between preference as welfare and interventionist overtures toward the good are, perhaps, less of a dilemma than it might seem. That is, a rejection of one is not an acceptance of the other.

Insofar as market structures are understood as inherent arguments for negative liberty, it is important to note that this is not, *ipso facto*, a rejection of preference hierarchy or objective moral goods that are worthy of our pursuit above others. The objectivist approach to value, animated by the faith tradition, asserts that there is an essence to our reality—gradations of intrinsic value to the dimensions of people, places, and things we encounter (what Cavanaugh (2008) describes as "the pursuit of an end that is objectively valid" (p. ix)). Given this, what are the implications for our understanding of the market and, moreover, our navigation within it?

As mentioned, a preference is not the same thing as a desire, but it is an expression of desire.¹³ To draw out a moral dimension to desire is to think carefully about the nature of what we desire, lest our actions be solely determined by our various cravings. "The good life"—wrote Robert and Edward Skidelsky (2012)—"is not simply one of satisfied desire; it indicates the proper goal of desire. Desire is to be cultivated, directed to the truly desirable. Moral education is an education of the sentiments"

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(pp. 72–73). This is a classical idea, as it was Aristotle (1999) who believed that education should be aimed toward rightly ordered affections, desires, and impulses.

One of the more theologically rich explorations and expressions of preference, desire, and satisfaction can be found in the work of St. Augustine. In *The City of God*, Augustine equates virtue with ordinate affections. He wrote: “For love itself is to be ordinally loved, because we do well to love that which, when we love it, makes us live well and virtuously. So that it seems to me that it is a brief but true definition of virtue to say, it is the order of love” (Chapter 22). That is, for Augustine, virtue is a “disposition that inclines us to achieve the good for which we are made” (Smith, 2016, p. 89).¹⁴

Augustine’s theology and his exploration of desire and human will can helpfully move us beyond superficial critiques of markets or binary questions around negative and positive freedom. Just as humans would be foolish to ignore the laws of physical nature (e.g., gravity), their failure to recognize and adhere to the moral reality is equally perilous. Augustine scholar Thomas Williams (1993) wrote: “The morally grown-up human being recognizes this law for what it is: an immutable standard of divine authority, one that binds us unconditionally, quite independently of what we may happen to desire or believe” (p. xiv). With this in mind, we may superimpose a richer, more capacious understanding of freedom, desire, and welfare (flourishing) onto the grid of market exchange and enterprise.

To begin, it is insightful to look at Augustine’s account of evil or sin. This is helpfully laid out in one of his more popular books, *On Free Choice of the Will*. In his dialogue with Evodius, Augustine is given the example of adultery as an action understood as “evil.” After asking what, exactly, makes adultery evil, Evodius responds, “I would not tolerate it if someone tried to commit adultery with my own wife. Anyone who does to another what he does not want done to himself does evil” (p. 4). Augustine, however, suggests that someone may willingly offer their own spouse (“wife”) to another and take equal liberties with someone else’s spouse. According to the rule put forward by Evodius, “he does not sin, since he is not doing anything that he is unwilling to have done to himself” (p. 5). Evodius responds that perhaps adultery may be understood as evil because many have traditionally been condemned for such a crime. Again, however, Augustine identifies the flaw in his thinking. Specificall-

ly, he references the men and women who have been condemned even though their deeds were good (apostles, martyrs, etc.). When Evodius is without response, Augustine offers his own explanation: “Then perhaps what makes adultery evil is inordinate desire, whereas so long as you look for the evil in the external, visible act, you are bound to encounter difficulties” (p. 5). Reminiscent of Christ’s sermon on the mount, Augustine identifies evil action as an effect, a symptom, of a contaminated interior cause: “In order to understand that inordinate desire is what makes adultery evil, consider this: if a man is unable to sleep with someone else’s wife, but it is somehow clear that he would like to, and would do so if he had the chance, he is no less guilty than if he were caught in the act” (pp. 5–6).

This is an important dimension of Augustine’s theology of the sin nature. An evil act is merely reflective of internal disorder. Sin is not merely “missing the mark” (erroneous action), but *incurvatus in se*, or a person “curved inward on oneself.”¹⁵ In other words, sin is a disposition. Kelly Kopic (2010) wrote: “St. Augustine spoke of sin as that which bends or curves us toward the ground, making us more like the beasts and less like the God whom we were to image. He speculated that we were created to have our heads and hearts raised toward Yahweh, and sin is that which turns our gaze from him” (p. 37).

This understanding of sin elucidates Augustine’s theology of free will. Note that a person “curved inward” is a person aimed in a particular direction (i.e., facing away from God; focused away from God; turned away from God). For Augustine, free will was understood as one’s aim. Indeed, the idea that humans aim, love, desire, or value is one of the more defining characteristics of humanity. To love is human. We all aim toward something. James K.A. Smith (2016) wrote: “To be human is to be *for* something, directed toward something, oriented toward something” (p. 8). Moreover, we have free will or agency by which to aim, value, pursue, and desire.

So we are free to choose, and yet, our capacity to choose does not necessarily make us free. In *On Two Souls, Against the Manichaeans*, Augustine defines the will (*voluntas*) as the un-compelled movement of the mind/soul. As Paul Camacho (2016) points out, this idea of the will as un-coerced and uniquely ours “would seem to support an identification of freedom with self-determination” (pp. 1–20). However, this would only capture part of Augustine’s understanding. We may have the capac-

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ity for *voluntas*, aiming our innermost self toward that which we desire, but our hearts will be found restless until we choose that which is most worthy of our choice. Put differently, we may have free will, but our wills have a teleological destination. This is the essence of one of Augustine's most famous lines, found in his *Confessions*: "[F]or you have made us for yourself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in you" (p. 3). We have free will or free aim, but we were designed to link ourselves with our designer. In *On Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine wrote:

The very fact that anyone who uses free will to sin is divinely punished shows that free will was given to enable human beings to live rightly, for such punishment would be unjust if free will had been given both for living rightly and for sinning. After all, how could someone justly be punished for using the will for the very purpose for which it was given? When God punishes a sinner, don't you think he is saying, "Why didn't you use your free will for the purpose for which I gave it to you?"—that is, for living rightly? (p. 30)

Evil is not, therefore, characterized by choice. Rather, it is choosing (or turning) away from "the unchangeable good and toward changeable goods" (p. 69). As Tennyson wrote in his poem "In Memoriam," "Our wills are ours we know not how; our wills are ours to make them thine." Thus, we were created for love, and created to love the Creator—to be in intimate communion with God.

This illuminates two related, but separate, dimensions of the human capacity to love and desire. The first is an overture toward fulfillment: We love, and we desire, because we aim to find completeness, satisfaction, and gratification in our pursuit and apprehension of the object of our desire. Here desire is born out of necessity, something we lack. The second dimension of love comes not from lack, but from recognition. That is, our love, desire, and aim is a response to something distinctly other. For this reason, we might say that the good, true, and beautiful is that which demands our ordinate affections. Camacho (2016) describes loving-desire, not as something I possess so much as something I *suffer*; I possess loving-desire, but loving-desire also possesses me (p. 4).

In this sense, we may carry desire, but our desires carry us. Augustine uses the metaphor of a stone to characterize the proper place of a thing's nature. A stone will roll down a hill not due to some extrinsic force, but

due to its own weight. Smoke, alternatively, will rise into the air as the space it was naturally meant to occupy. Similarly, the human soul has a weight, and such a weight is its love (Augustine, 2007). Augustine (1993) identifies a crucial difference, however, as “the stone has no power to check its downward movement” (p. 72). Here, Camacho (2016) points out that the human will is unique because it can redirect its aim, or its *motion*: “While no one would dream of blaming a stone for its fall, we do blame the individual for sliding into inferior appetites, because there is nothing about the will’s fall that is natural” (p. 9).

So inescapably, and perhaps even unwittingly, we are desirers and lovers. Moreover, our love, we might say, qualifies our free wills. As Julian Marias (1967) wrote: “[A]nd so a proper will is good love and a perverse will is bad love” (p. 119). This insight has significant implications for loving-desire understood as, or conceived by, lack. David Naugle (2008) wrote: “The greatest disordered love of all is our confident but false hope that our love for things in the world, despite their goodness and desirability, can satisfy the need we have for loving union with God” (p. 51).

This has significance for how we understand satisfaction, fulfillment, and human welfare. We move toward that which delights us (our weight is our love), and we are restless until—like a stone resting at the bottom of a hill—we have found our natural resting place.¹⁶ Smith (2016) wrote: “If our loves are absorbed with material things, then our love is a weight that drags us downward to inferior things. But when our loves are animated by the renewing fire of the Spirit, then our weight tends upward” (p. 14). In this imagery, love is a kind of gravity, pulling us into higher or lower regions based upon what we love, the object of our love. In this sense, human liberty is not constituted by choice alone; it is intimately bound up in choosing what we were designed for. Williams (1993) refers to this as “genuine freedom,” freedom that “involves using one’s metaphysical freedom to cleave to the eternal law, to love what is good, to submit to truth” (p. xviii). Desiring what we were made to desire is not an affront to freedom, “but rather an opening to being freed beyond the self” (Camacho, 2016, p. 19).¹⁷

6 Conclusion

The preference satisfaction assumption inherent within the economics discipline implicitly subscribes, or at the very least reinforces, an attenu-

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ated conception of welfare. People are made better off by satisfying their preferences, irrespective of their nature. Yet as Hausman and McPherson (2009) wrote, “a preference satisfaction model is only good if the preference actually reflects what is good for that person (what is healthy, whole, moral, and relationally just, etc.)” (p. 19).

As argued, if we are designed, teleological creatures who inhabit a moral reality—as Augustine believed—then human excellence and fulfillment will be intricately bound up not simply in pursuing and consuming what we want, but in desiring as we should. To be clear, this insight is not a threat to the free market structure, nor does it suggest some internal flaw in its makeup. Nor would an Augustinian account lend itself to interventionist attempts to regulate or shape certain preferences, as such efforts would be futile at best, particularly in a pluralist society. Even if there were public consensus of the good, efforts to effectuate collective preferences toward this end would fall short of Augustine’s notions of freedom and will.

Markets facilitate our desires, allowing us to choose—to *aim*—as we please. This act of freedom is consonant with Augustine’s account of freedom and free choice (*voluntas*). However, he equally recognizes that free choice, alone, does not make us free. We were made, indeed designed, to aim, pursue, connect, and intertwine our faculties in communion with our creator. As C. S. Lewis (1952) famously wrote: “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. . . . Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing” (pp. 136–137).

David Naugle (2008) helpfully points out that this is not the eradication of desire itself or desiring the earthly goods around us. Rather, it is *ordered* desire, Augustine’s very notion of virtue.

The genius of the Christian faith, however, is that it does not call upon us to eliminate our love for things on earth out of our love for God in heaven. It’s not either God or the world, but both God and the world in a proper relationship. When he is at the top of our list of loves, we are able to love and enjoy all things in the context of our relationship with him. (p. 21)

Disordered love, weighted toward the inferior goods of life, is not only a source of evil, but is constituted by restlessness and dissatisfaction.

It is in ordering our loves—desiring what is truly desirable, loving what is truly lovely, and pursuing that which is truly worthy of pursuit—that we experience genuine freedom, satisfaction, and human welfare. Preference satisfaction which is best realized through the free market structure will not, alone, account for welfare in the Judeo-Christian telling of reality, particularly in Augustine’s understanding. However, the market structure also allows agents to desire, to *aim*, in a redemptively volitional manner.¹⁸ The life ordered around God begets ordered loves—what Augustine understands as virtue—and is the place of rest, satisfaction, and fulfillment. In the Judeo-Christian meta-narrative, this is true welfare.

Endnotes

- 1 It is worth noting that these robots may, in some ways, be understood as addressing a market demand. A recent study points out that over 80% of the pornographic content analyzed involves aggression, harm, or violence (typically of a man against a female). See Bridges, et al. (2010).
- 2 Italics are his.
- 3 Amartya Sen’s popular 1977 essay “Rational Fools” was one of the more noteworthy challenges to Edgeworth’s work around individual preference maximization through exchange—arguing for a vision of the human that accounts for moral commitments and sympathy for others.
- 4 It is important to note that the phrase “preference satisfaction” is more philosophical in its makeup, whereas economists would likely use the expression “utility maximization.” However, I have specifically opted for the former expression as it better captures the nature of what I am trying to explore. That is, can we reasonably equate the satisfaction of preferences with true human welfare and flourishing?
- 5 For an extensive background predating late 18th Century economics, see Kauder (2015).
- 6 Hausman does not necessarily equate utility with happiness or pleasure. He writes: “To speak of individuals as *aiming to* maximize utility or as *seeking* more utility may suggest misleadingly that utility is an object of choice, some ultimately good thing that people want in addition to healthy children or better television. But the theory of rational choice specifies no distinctive aims. This fact is of considerable

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- importance to moral theory, for utility theory as such is detached from any hedonistic psychology” (p. 680, italics his).
- 7 Austrian Economists, in particular, stress the subjective theory of value as relating to each individual as it helps to describe human activity, or praxeology. Ludwig Von Mises (1998) writes: “No treatment of economic problems proper can avoid starting from acts of choice; economics becomes a part, although hitherto the best elaborated part, of a more universal science, praxeology” (p. 3).
 - 8 He goes on to write: “Utility theory analyzes the laws of the values and choices of an individual; welfare theory discusses the relationship between the values of many individuals, and the consequent possibilities of a scientific conclusion on the ‘social’ desirability of various alternatives” (p. 289).
 - 9 People of faith may link this to the problem of original sin. That said, this argument does not necessarily rest upon a theological claim. When evaluating welfare, some economists have argued for “rational” preferences or “laundered” preferences, i.e., preferences that omit unsavory characteristics such as racism or sexism, as opposed to “real” preferences.
 - 10 A closer look at the etymology of “virtue” conveys this very notion. As David Gill (2000) has written, the term “literally means something like power.” Virtue is a disposition, the capacity to act rightly. Gill writes: “Virtues are thus not just ‘values’ (traits that I feel are worthwhile) but ‘powers’ (real capabilities of achieving something good)” (p. 30).
 - 11 Sandel echoed this sentiment in his 2009 book *Justice* where he points out that creating markets for otherwise aesthetically valued goods such as pregnancy/surrogacy, reading a book, civic virtue, etc., reduces the otherwise pluralistic values of such goods to mere utility or money. Although this idea is not new, it was intuitive of Sandel to address this topic and, in doing so, validate it as a “contemporary” issue. In his book, he concludes his chapter on markets with the question: “Are there certain virtues and higher goods that markets do not honor and money cannot buy?” (p. 98). Specifically, Sandel has drawn upon the work of Philosopher Elizabeth Anderson (1993) in this respect. Her “expressive theory” has been instrumental in Sandel’s identification of “higher goods.” Essentially, the expressive theory attempts to locate the mode of valuation in its proper sphere based upon “rational

- action that adequately expresses our rational attitudes toward people and other intrinsically valuable things” (p. 17).
- 12 They go on to write: “It does not matter, from the economic point of view, whether people are altruists, egoists, hedonists, masochists or anything else; all that matters is that they have certain preferences and act on them” (p. 101).
 - 13 For example, one can desire both coffee and tea, but they cannot *prefer* them both.
 - 14 Virtue as an inclination toward the good suggests that “ordered love” is not necessarily inconsistent with the masculine properties inherent in the term (i.e., virtue as power/capacity).
 - 15 The Latin expression *incurvatus in se* was not original to Augustine, but fruitfully captures his understanding of sin.
 - 16 To return to the notion of utility and Ely’s distinction between satisfying wants and conferring benefits, Augustine’s notion of satisfaction could be categorized under the latter. Creation implies teleology, and thus fulfillment and human realization are intricately tied to partaking in that for which we were made.
 - 17 As Camacho suggests, our capacity to aim can be characterized as a free act; that we can find freedom in anything we choose to aim toward is a deception. In this sense, humans are not free to determine the true source of our ends.
 - 18 While the market does provide agents with free, uncoerced choice, it does not follow that the market is a necessary external environment to attain “ordered love.” Robert Lovelace captures this idea in his famous poem, *To Althea, From Prison*: “Stone walls do not a prison make, Nor iron bars a cage; Minds innocent and quiet take that for a hermitage. But if I have freedom in my love, And in my soul am free, Angels alone that soar above, Enjoy such liberty.” That said, we might say that the market structure as an external environment is superior to an interventionist arrangement aimed to shape our preferences, since the former allow us to choose the good, and since love, by definition, presupposes moral free agency.

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