

True Will

Some Ill-Advised Thoughts on the Matter

Johnathon Victor Reese · 6 September 2026

The concept of the so-called *True Will* can be a tricky little beast. It's thrown around by many who seem to latch onto it as some kind of catch-all for their behavior at any given moment. It's my "True Will" *to do* XYZ—from skydiving to couch surfing to bedding someone else's husband/wife/partner/etc (or trying to, at least).¹

What exactly is True Will anyway?

True Will is a Crowleyism.²

Nowhere in any of the Class A texts, or in the *Book of the Law* specifically, is the phrase used. The closest functional equivalent is 'pure will' [AL 1.44]. Yet so much of Crowley's work points to a singular concept underlying the meaning of True Will/Pure Will that being pedantic about it seems, well, pedantic. Part of the issue is Crowley likes to be Crowley: pompous, meandering, difficultly obtuse in places, and (of course) pretends he is the 'Master of the English Language.' But the concept he presents is straightforward nearly everywhere. What "we" have done is alternately defined True Will as a mush of esoteric nonsense within a mishmash of external sources, as an impotent "whatever I feel like" excuse, or as some equally asinine bullshit from the echo chamber like "find out what you want to do with your life and then do it."³

In a Nutshell

True Will is, ultimately, *that which gives direction to the motion of a Star*.

That seems simple enough, but the devil is in the details, and I know many can and will disagree on those details. Some have attempted to claim that True Will is the same as “Free Will.” But let’s be clear: the universe, according to Thelemic doctrine, *is* inherently deterministic.⁴

The *Book of the Law* provides us with the breakdown of how this all works in relation to us as individuals and the intent of our existence: True Will is the specific, essential direction [*So with thy all; thou hast no right but to do thy will*; AL 1.42b] of the motion (or existence) [*divided for love’s sake, for the chance of union*; AL 1.29] of any given Star. Crowley comments on this latter again in *Magick Without Tears* where he writes, “There is no Being apart from Going.”⁵

Put another way, the general motion of Hadit [the *ground of Becoming*] is what separates [i.e., causes the existence of] the Star from Nuit [the *ground of Being*]. But it is this aspect of True Will [*meaning-itself*] that solidifies a deterministic understanding of our essential direction.

To sum it up even more simply:

- Hadit is *displacement* [existence].
- True Will is *direction* [experience].

The Truth About True Will

But what do we *do* with this information? What is the point of understanding such minutiae of True Will?

Nothing.

Yup. Nothing. We could *all* go through life just fine without needing *any* of this information at all. And I would submit that most people on this planet do just fine without knowing anything about True Will. If anything, attempting to run around “trying to discover one’s True Will” only increases the level of angst in life.

I mean, *everyone* still has a True Will that influences their existential nature. Just because you may or may not be accidentally following your True Will is no reason to believe that you actually *know* it. You can walk down the street and not know that you're headed Due North save that you have a general idea that you're headed in a "northerly" direction because the Sun is setting in *that*-erly direction on your left side. But you could be headed *precisely* Due North only by sheer accident. Until you get a working compass, you'll not know for sure.

But do you care? I mean, do you *really* care whether you are going Due North or just "north-ish-ly" or even just "that-a-way" by interest or instinct? Maybe you do. Maybe you don't. Maybe you just need a compass. Maybe you need a map. What kind of map? (And with that, we'll stop and move on. The *map* conversation is for an entirely different time!)

Doctrine of Will

But since we're here, let's see what we can do with all this information anyway, right?

First, we need to grasp the doctrine of Will in order to best present this understanding to others. True Will is liberty, but this particular liberty is also the strictest discipline we can know (even if we don't act like it most of the time). Through an understanding of True Will, we find our place in the world. Our place is not always as the next guru or prophet or best-selling purveyor of bullshit. Sometimes we discover that we're destined to shine as a field laborer or a schoolteacher or a grocery stocker as the manifestation of that Will. It's not always glamorous. It's not living up to that "past life" Cleopatra the Card Reader sold you over at the Renaissance Faire to go with your sausage on a stick.

Don't misunderstand me and think that I mean you can only "be" one thing in life. That isn't how True Will works. It has to be remembered that True Will isn't a job or a career or a specific material outcome.⁶ If we use all of the clues left by Crowley throughout his corpus, we can offer a more technical definition of True Will as *the formula by which each individual continuously calculates, measures, and evaluates the*

least obstructive trajectory of their life. He comments on AL 2.44 that we should look at True Will “as the true expression of the Nature, *the proper or inherent motion* of the matter, concerned.”⁷ Everything has a “proper or inherent motion,” a True Will: you, me, a tree, an animal, a community, a country. *Everything*.

However, True Will could also be said to be the manner by which we experience life in a specific manner to the joy of Nuit. It is the collection of experiences that expands the nature of Nuit herself. It is the union of love and will that is the expression of the joy of existence.

I am never going to be a great actor. When I was sixteen, I had a yelling match with my dad about wanting to run off to be an actor and that I didn’t want to go to college for a business degree like he wanted me to do. I ended up with a business degree anyway, but one of the things I’ve learned along the way is that I’m never going to be a great businessman either (or at least the money end of a business). It’s not part of my Will. It’s not part of the nature of who I am. When it comes to business, I’m going to have to trust in someone else whose nature it is to have business as part of their own Will. While I can act, and I can perform as an actor (I *was* on cast with a Renaissance Faire for a short time), *being an actor* isn’t part of my True Will either. It doesn’t fit in with what I know of my Will. It doesn’t really help it along in any meaningful way. It is fun, and it doesn’t *harm* my Will—so there is no need to *avoid* it, certainly—but I know that it’s not a skill I need to hone as meaningful to my existence (or to “the accomplishment of my True Will,” as some might phrase it).⁸

Those who claim that a single lifetime is a waste, in a universe billions of years old, miss the point of existence itself. We are not here to fulfill some “grand mission” of our own apart from this fulfillment of our True Will. Existence is its own reward. *Existence exists* for the purpose of Nuit’s pleasure. Yet grasping this True Will allows us to find our own joy in relation to the life we live and provides us with a manner in which to more consciously participate in our own existence.⁹

The question always comes down to this: is it even necessary to discover one’s True Will?

Nope.

Then why do it?

All of existence is the necessary and sufficient manifestation and extension of Nuit's desire. "The only sane solution is ... to suppose that the Perfect enjoys experience of (apparent) Imperfection."¹⁰ We will gather that experience whether we like it or not, but it is far more enjoyable *for us* if we learn our place and lean into it. Unhappy is the person who remains stuck in a prison of ignorance and fighting the inertia of the universe.

Second, Crowley talks about distilling the formula of [True] Will into "One Word."¹¹ How do we get that word? Isn't True Will just a private feeling or a personal conviction? (*I'm often asked.*) No, it's not. (*I always reply.*) I remain convinced that those who lack the ability to explain their True Will in a single word haven't actually worked through any understanding of that *Will in Motion*. They are tackling True Will as a singular goal to be reached, or a thing to be held in hand, rather than *a process of epistemological alignment* through the ongoing depth of exploration.¹²

Crowley insists, in multiple different ways in various places throughout his corpus, that the Great Work¹³ is the manner by which we come into the Knowledge of and Conversation with our True Will, of that distillation of our Will into a single Word, a personal (small-I) *logos*, or self-referential *meaning-itself*. How? Crowley, again, states "The Great Work therefore consists principally in the solution of complexes."¹⁴ This is quite specific. It doesn't happen with a single ritual attempt or over a weekend or two.

Solution of Complexes

This solution of complexes, this Great Work, is *the archeology of personal existence, expression, and meaning across multiple validity domains*. This is a process that is life-altering, to say the least. In my opinion, it does not ever stop being necessary to plumb the depths of our True Will, to find the aspects and angles of our Will to

better express it through our daily intentions and actions. Even if one should cross the so-called “Abyss,” the human capacity for generating new complexes remains to start anew. It’s a cyclic spiral of spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and psychological evolution in the Aspirant.

Granted, it sounds very Freudian, and I’m quite sure that Crowley was thinking of Freud’s work when he wrote that definition. However, we’ve progressed beyond the Victorian era and the psychological techniques of that era. While Freudian psychoanalysis is worthwhile, there is far more to this process than merely sitting on a couch and talking about dear ol’ mom and being spanked as a child.^{[15](#)}

I believe that any number of processes—psychological, magical, and mystical—are capable of providing this level of insight (or discovering this personal “compass”), and many are even more successful than the psychoanalysis that Crowley recommended. In fact, Crowley himself said that the consistent use of the *Book of the Law*, of the Law itself, as “the Universal Key to every problem of Life, and then apply it to one particular case after another. [...] Thus he will assimilate the Law, and make it the norm of his conscious being; *this by itself will suffice to initiate him, to dissolve his complexes, to unveil himself to himself*[.]”^{[16](#)}

Granted, I think it takes a bit more than that, but his point is taken. And I believe there is no mystery underlying Crowley’s explanation that is very simple to grasp.

When we talk about Thelema, we have to understand that this revelation comes in two forms: a *general revelation* and a *special revelation*.

The latter is the *Book of the Law*. This makes up the specific and special revelation of the Law of Thelema. Those of us who follow its Way are Thelemites.^{[17](#)}

The former, however, this general revelation, is exemplified in another quote from Crowley about the Law of Thelema when he writes, “‘Do what thou wilt’ is to bid Stars to shine, Vines to bear grapes, Water to seek its level.”^{[18](#)} The Law exhibits itself through all *natural* processes [that “*proper or inherent motion*”] of manifested life. By merely understanding this conception of the Law, of its connection with True Will [once again, that “*proper or inherent motion*”] as an expression of that

Law, its regular and consistent application resolves complexes and reveals our True Will in the process. I honestly believe it is *that* simple.

93 Million Dollar Question

But even though we've defined True Will, ultimately, what exactly is it? That is the 93 million dollar question after all, right?

The simple, brief answer is 'destiny understood,' one's specific *meaning-in-life* and the expression(s) of it. It is to be "conscious of [one's] own consecrated course, and confidently ready to run it."¹⁹

It is Hadit set apart [consecrated], in Motion, and nurturing its own Nature [direction] to the fulfillment of Nuit's self-expression and expansion [change] through division and development.²⁰

Let me make it even more simple: True Will is *why*, not *what*, you do with your life. The movie *Collateral Beauty* put it succinctly: "What is your *why*?" In order to know that, you have to know everything about yourself: *objectively*, *subjectively*, *interobjectively*, and *intersubjectively*. It's a journey you take that never ends no matter how much "attainment" you reach.

The True Self is the meaning of the True Will: know Thyself through Thy Way!²¹

While not a definitive exposition, I think it's a decent start to something more.

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1. My cynicism is showing. My apologies. That last one has been legendary within O.T.O. circles for decades. The fact that it used to work (does it still?) shows just how little we emphasize contextual understandings and proper exegetic techniques within our communities. __
2. Though it has been claimed that he may have borrowed it from Levi. __

3. Colin D. Campbell, *Thelema: An Introduction to the Life, Work & Philosophy of Aleister Crowley* (Llewellyn Worldwide, 2018), 74. [_](#)
4. The conundrum of determinism vs. free will is a long-standing philosophical argument, but I think Thelema can also resolve that dilemma (not here or today, but I do believe that is a possibility). And, before anyone has an aneurysm, determinism doesn't do away with *choice*—that would be *pre-determinism*, which I would agree is not very Thelemic at all. [_](#)
5. Aleister Crowley, "Tao (1)," in *Magick Without Tears* (New Falcon Publications, 1994), 229. [_](#)
6. I've spent the past 40 years in several different *fields of endeavor*—primarily technology, gaming, education, and mental health (sometimes all of these together)—but these were all in the same trajectory of my Will. Some *jobs* in those fields have been more useful toward the fulfillment of that Will than others, but nearly all ultimately have worked toward accomplishing the nature of that Will. Those that didn't fell off quite quickly. As I continue to refine the finer details of that Will, I have adjusted what I *do*, but the underlying Will [direction] hasn't changed. And even when I didn't overtly understand or acknowledge that Will, I was still (mostly) headed in that *general* direction, even when it felt more like bumper cars than Formula 500. [_](#)
7. Crowley Aleister, *The Law Is for All: The Authorized Popular Commentary to Liber AL Vel Legis Sub Figura CCXX, the Book of the Law*, ed. Wilkinson Louis (New Falcon Publications, 1996), 46 (emphasis mine). [_](#)
8. It must be remembered that not every experience is meant for every individual. It's not about *forbidden* experiences but about *available* experiences. It is truthful that *nothing* is forbidden, but it's not true to say that *all* is available. And quite frankly, if I'm honest about it, gaining experience as an actor really has helped. It eliminated my lifelong stage fright, which would have been debilitating in front of large groups of students (and probably patients, too). So, ultimately, it *did* help my "True Will" along insofar as my current jobs are in service to that Will. [_](#)
9. Nuit speaks and says, "I am above you and in you. My ecstasy is in yours. My joy is to see your joy" [AL 1.13]. The result of this enthusiastic union, which

we call 'love,' through each joining of our point of view with that of any other experience which changes us, is *joy*. _

10. Aleister, *The Law Is for All*, 33. _

11. Aleister Crowley et al., *Magick: Liber ABA* (Weiser Books, 1997), 134. _

12. This is, in part, why “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law” is an epistemological statement rather than an ethical claim. It’s certainly *not* axiomatic or a “first principle” (cf. Balk, Antti P. 2018. *The Law of Thelema: Aleister Crowley’s Philosophy of True Will*. Thelema Publications). Balk’s claims are philosophically untenable, unsupported even by Crowley’s own *Commentaries*, and asinine on the face of them—especially for someone who claims to be a “professional philosopher.” _

13. The “Great Work” has many different meanings depending on the framework in which it is used. Within Thelema, exclusively, this always means the so-called “Knowledge and Conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel” as defined by Crowley (which does not have any connection to any other historical concept *beyond the use of the name as an intentional absurdity*), that is, the archaeology and articulation of the True Will. And, yes, I know there is more to it, ontologically speaking, but this isn’t *that* essay. _

14. Aleister, *The Law Is for All*, 32. _

15. Though quite frankly, Freudianism has been outside the mainstream of psychology for a long time. Occulture is still trying to pretend that Jung is relevant when he’s one of the least validated psychologists in the field. Nearly all of his work is confirmation bias because it “feels neat” to those who live out a *mythic-literal* worldview. Whereas Freud infantilized spiritual states, Jung spiritualized wishful thinking. It doesn’t mean we’re not still using Jung’s work. It just means that we’re careful about *how* we use his work. _

16. Aleister, *The Law Is for All*, 184 (emphasis mine). _

17. I recognize there are debates over terminology, but I’m not entering those today. _

18. Crowley et al., *Magick*, 510. _

19. Crowley et al., *Magick*, 494. _

20. Crowley et al., *Magick*, 248fn; AL 1.22, 29, etc.. _

21. Aleister Crowley, *The Heart of the Master & Other Papers* (New Falcon Publications, 1997), 53. [_](#)

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