comment

The Will to Flourish: Reframing Suffering and Volition in Missional Therapy

Abstract
Building on and extending Kroll's framework of the will, I highlight how volitional capacity enables and sustains the will to flourish through meeting the inherent psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. While commending Kroll's framing of will and moral imagination, I also critique the limitations of traditional models like Kohlberg's moral stages and propose a more theologically grounded alternative: missional psychotherapy. I drew from Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' (2 Cor 12) and Kroll's case study (Ms. M.) to theorize how missional therapy reframes suffering as a site of volitional growth and missional alignment. The proposed PLEA model of missional therapy—Personalize, Locate, Engage, Apply—offers a therapeutic arc for clients to reengage their will within the redemptive mission of God. Ultimately, I argue in this paper that flourishing is not the absence of struggle, but the activation of will in service of transcendent purpose, even amid the crushing thorns of life.

Introduction
The will stands as one of the most enigmatic and yet indispensable constructs in understanding human behavior and flourishing. At its core, the volition or power to choose reflects an individual's capacity to initiate and direct action toward meaningful ends (Haggard, 2008). In fact, the foundation of modern motivation science rests on the distinction between "why" people act (their motives and goals) and "how" they convert those motives into sustained action (their volitional capacities).

One of the most influential psychological science theories used to understand human motivation and will is self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT posits that human flourishing and motivation depends on the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to experiencing oneself as the initiator of one's actions; competence involves a sense of mastery and efficacy; relatedness reflects the need for meaningful connection with others. Within this framework, will (the power to choose) and volition (the act of making choices) are expressions of autonomous motivation. In other words, when individuals act in ways that are congruent with their deeply held values or needs, they exhibit integrated forms of self-regulation that align with their flourishing. In contrast, when action is controlled by external pressures or internal coercions, volitional capacities may become fragile or fragmented. From the SDT framework, then, we can conceptualize the will as the faculty or power to choose or make conscious choices that align with our psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.
One of the most valuable contributions of Kroll's (2025) article is its holistic treatment of the will as both a developmental and relational construct. Kroll resists the tendency to treat volition as a purely cognitive skill or biological trait. Instead, she traces its emergence from early attachment relationships,

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emotional regulation capacities, and moral development. This systems-oriented view echoes contemporary developmental science, where volition is understood as shaped by an interaction between person and context over time. The emphasis on the developmental and relational formation of will does, to some degree, also aligns with SDT's claim that supportive interpersonal environments foster autonomous functioning. For example, her discussion of self-love and Kolberg's moral scaffolding provided by caregivers parallels SDT's recognition that early caregiving shapes one's motivational orientation, preparing one for a lifetime of relationships. Autonomy-supportive parenting is shown to associate with stronger volitional regulation (Benito-Gomez et al. 2020)), while controlling environments impair the internalization of self-endorsed values (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989).
While SDT emphasizes psychological needs and the quality of motivation, other theories such as Expectancy-Value Theories (Eccles & Wigfield, 2000, 2002) focus on the cognitive evaluations individuals make when deciding whether to pursue a goal. Two key appraisals drive motivated behavior here: (1) expectancy beliefs (i.e., confidence in one's ability to succeed), and (2) subjective task values (i.e., how important, interesting, or useful the task appears). In other words, these judgments inform whether a person will mobilize their will to engage in action. Kroll's notion of volitional paralysis, as exemplified in her case study of Ms. M., illustrates how impaired expectancy and devalued goals can undermine the exercise of will. Ms. M.'s anxiety, avoidance, and immobilization reflect diminished efficacy beliefs and possibly low valuation of the tasks at hand. Expectancy-Value Theory suggests that interventions to rebuild Ms. M.'s will would require recalibrating both her self-efficacy and the perceived value of the life transitions confronting her. Importantly, Expectancy-Value frameworks highlight that volition is rarely independent of context. Structural opportunities, social norms, and cultural expectations directly influence how individuals evaluate their capabilities and life options. Kroll gestures toward these realities by emphasizing how early experiences, cultural-religious narratives, and family systems create the 'experiential space' within which will develop.

Nonetheless, the treatment of moral development in Kroll's paper, while useful, is overly dependent on Kohlberg's stage model without engaging more contemporary or culturally sensitive accounts of moral formation. Kohlberg's theory, though foundational, has been critiqued for privileging Western, individualist conceptions of morality and for underemphasizing relational, justice, and virtue dimensions of ethical development (Crittenden, 2005; Locle, 1979; Snarey, 1985). While the overemphasis on Kohlberg's framework may be positioning the paper for a Western audience, Kroll did a good job in situating the will within a distinctively Christian anthropology, which emphasizes the imago Dei and the intrinsic dignity of persons. Given the positioning of Kroll's paper, I seek to answer the following two questions in response to Kroll's paper:

1. What happens when our will does not reflect the *Missio Dei* promise as the people sent by God in the world?
2. How does Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' in 2 Corinthians 12 enrich and inform our understanding of the tension between one's will and the mission of God?
3. How can we regulate our action to participate in the mission of God despite our life's challenging stories?

This is pertinent especially given that volition, in control theory (see Carver & Scheier, 2001), involves sustained self-regulation across time and changing circumstances. Thus, can life span changes challenge the inherent nature of one's sense of autonomy, competence or mastery, and relationships? When these psychological needs, fundamental for powering their will, are disrupted due to life's circumstances, what is the missional hope thereof for such individuals?

The Bridge Between Motivation and Missional Action: A Case of Paul's Thorn as Volitional Homeostasis

In the psychology of action literature, the Rubicon model draws a line between motivation and volition, and between contemplating a goal and committing to act (Heckhausen, 2007). While motivation concerns deliberation, volition entails the gritty, ongoing regulation of behavior through fluctuating circumstances. Gollwitzer (1999) and subsequent research (see Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006) demonstrate that action planning and implementation intentions serve as psychological scaffolding that transforms good intentions into sustained action. Theologically, this distinction between motivation and volition echoes Kroll's 'didactics of the will,' which roots volitional development within a Christian anthropology of the imago Dei, which is the belief that humans are image-bearers of a volitional God. Still a critical question persists: What happens when our will no longer aligns with the *missio Dei* (our participation in the redemptive work of God in the world; Counted et al., 2024), especially when life's pain and struggles threaten to derail our sense of purpose?

To explore this tension, I turn to Paul's testimony in 2 Corinthians 12, where he speaks of a 'thorn in the flesh,' which, according to Paul, was a persistent affliction allowed by God. While Paul pleads for relief, God's answer is paradoxical: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9, NIV). Paul interprets the thorn not as a punishment, but as a divine provision with three functional purposes. First, it was to retain his humility and keep him grounded despite his revelations. Paul opens this passage with a reference to "surpassingly great revelations" (2 Cor 12:7), likely alluding to his mystical experiences; perhaps even the third-heaven encounter described earlier in the chapter. Such spiritual elevation could easily have bred arrogance or a sense of superiority. Instead, Paul says, "Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn." The thorn served as a counterweight to spiritual pride. One could say that it was a regulatory measure against ego inflation. In psychological terms, such 'weight' functions like a corrective feedback loop in control theory (Carver & Scheier, 2001), recalibrating Paul's self-perception whenever his spiritual status might tempt him toward self-exaltation. God placed within Paul's life a boundary—an unresolved tension—precisely so that his giftedness would not devour his groundedness.

Second, the thorn was to remind Paul of his fragile humanity. His letters often reveal his dual identity: strong apostle, yet very human. He speaks of despairing "even of life itself" (2 Cor 1:8), of being "persecuted, but not abandoned" (2 Cor 4:9). The thorn, then, was not simply about humbling Paul, but also about reminding him he was human—mortal, vulnerable, finite. He could heal others, yet not himself. He could cast out demons, but not

this one. The thorn embodied that theological paradox: a man with divine power still needing divine mercy. In doing so, it helped Paul form a sense of humanity, which anchored his authority in weakness rather than dominance. Lastly, the thorn was 'given' to Paul to restore his homeostasis and maintain his spiritual and psychological equilibrium amid the extremes of success, pain, and calling. The most fundamental function of the thorn, arguably, is homeostatic. Homeostasis in drive reduction theory is the body's ability to maintain internal stability amid external change (Goldstein, 2019; Stagner, 1961). Paul was a man in motion; he was planting churches, enduring persecution, writing epistles to the church, undergoing imprisonments, and navigating both divine ecstasy and social rejection. In such extremes (e.g., visions and beatings, miracles and sleepless nights) Paul could have become psychologically imbalanced, swinging between euphoria and despair. The thorn became God's tool for calibrating Paul's soul and motivation, keeping him from spiritual and emotional burnout.

Therefore, the thorn functions as a form of divine regulation, a way to anchor Paul's will to God's mission through his struggles, not despite it. Rather than disengage, Paul reframes the thorn as a portal for God's power to be revealed through him. We see here a volitional homeostasis at work. In other words, there was a spiritual regulation that not only motivates Paul to focus on God but allows him to persist in his mission even when personal strength is depleted.

This vision is foundational for missional psychotherapy (Counted et al. 2024), which seeks to integrate the challenges of personal history into the greater arc of God's redemptive story. I have proposed a framework of missional therapy, which unfolds within a fourfold process that mirrors this transformation: Personalize, Locate, Engage, Apply (PLEA). This process starts with personalizing the story of God. With the help of the Christian mental health professional, clients begin by naming their experiences, including wounds and 'thorns,' while recognizing that these are not outside the scope of divine attention. And like Paul, they are invited to see their struggles not as disqualifications but as doorways into greater divine missional purpose. Second is to locate ourselves in God's grand narrative. At this task, clients explore where their story intersects with the larger *missio Dei*. The thorn, rather than being erased, becomes a theological and existential coordinate that locates them within the divine narrative of grace. At the third task, the client is encouraged to engage their struggles through the missional story of God. This starts ultimately by engaging the Will of God. With this engagement phase, clients are guided into volitional activation. At this phase, they can develop spiritual practices, goal-setting habits, and psychological flexibility to enact God's call through suffering, not in spite of it. At the final task, the clients are invited to apply the missional story of God to their story by living out their faith by turning outward, e.g. through serving, leading, witnessing. Their pain becomes testimony, their weakness becomes strength, and their story becomes part of the redemptive healing work of God in the world.

In this light, Paul's thorn became more than a metaphor. It was actually a model for how God uses affliction not to silence our calling but to regulate it and shape us into instruments of grace. Missional psychotherapy echoes

this very vision and offers a therapeutic framework that honors both the psychological complexity of volitional struggle and the theological promise that God's power is made perfect in our weakness (Counted et al., 2024). Flourishing, then, is not the absence of struggle, but the presence of divine purpose within it.

Towards Flourishing and Will in Missional Therapy

Kroll's framework presupposes a developmental arc that may not account for discontinuities or nonlinear growth. People do not always progress steadily toward maturity. Life's thorns such as setbacks, trauma, and health disruptions can destabilize volitional functioning and psychological needs even in highly competent individuals. Flourishing, then, requires not only learning to exert will but also learning to re-engage it after failure. The formation and exercise of the will are not simply technical skills that allow individuals to complete tasks. They are central to what it means to flourish as a person. To understand this link, we must then connect Kroll's emphasis on volitional development with broader frameworks of human flourishing. Both theology and motivation science offer overlapping insights that help explain how the ability to exert will support a full, meaningful, and flourishing life.

At its most basic, Christian flourishing involves living well across multiple dimensions of abundant life—happiness/contentment, meaning, health, character, relationships, stewardship (Counted et al., 2025). It is not simply about feeling good or achieving success but becoming fully alive, realizing one's potential in alignment with both individual values and the common good (Counted, 2025; Long et al., 2025). Volition plays an important role in each of these dimensions of a flourishing Christian life. However, the first and most obvious connection between volition and Christian flourishing lies in agency. Human beings need to experience themselves as capable actors who can make choices, set goals, pursue values, and adjust to changing circumstances. Without a functioning will, individuals struggle to move toward valued ends. Kroll's framework helps make this visible. Ms. M's stagnation is not due to a lack of desire but to a breakdown in her ability to translate desire into action whereas for Paul, his thorn led to finding a missional purpose that strengthens his resolve to transform his story of thorn to a story of grace. Ms. M's paralyzing anxiety reflects a collapse of agency and misalignment with God's missional purpose, a common experience for those facing overwhelming transitions or major life disruptions.

From the perspective of motivation science, agency, and by extension, the will, is closely tied to the satisfaction of psychological needs. According to Self-Determination Theory, people thrive when they experience autonomy (i.e., able to make choices aligned with their values), competence (i.e., able to effectively act), and relatedness (i.e., feeling connected to others). But will is more than a psychological mechanism. It has a missional dimension that is rarely talked about. Within the framework of missional psychotherapy (Counted et al., 2024), the will is shaped and summoned through a fourfold process: Personalize, Locate, Engage, Apply (PLEA). This model provides a redemptive path that reframes volition as not just self-directed but aligned with the redemptive mission of God.

For individuals like Ms. M, early life experiences often fracture the foundations of healthy volition. In the *Personalize* task of missional therapy, the process begins with naming these disruptions—not to pathologize them but to draw them into the light of divine concern. Wounds, weaknesses, and what

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Paul called “thorns” are not outside God’s awareness (2 Cor 12:7–10). Rather than treating them as deficiencies to be overcome, this stage invites clients to see their histories as the raw material of divine transformation. The will, in this stage, is not yet fully formed, but tentative, fragile, and searching. But by locating personal pain within God’s story, even brokenness begins to hint at purpose.

The second take is to *Locate*, which repositions the individual within the grand narrative of the *missio Dei* (Counted et al., 2024). In this task, we begin to reinterpret our lives not as random or wasted but as situated within a broader spiritual arc (Bosch, 2011). Volition becomes rooted not just in psychological resources but in theological orientation. The thorn becomes a marker of where one’s story intersects with God's redemptive mission. This reframing fosters meaning-making, especially in the face of suffering because when people are able to locate their pain within a sacred framework, their capacity for volitional action increases (Pargament, 2013). They no longer strive alone but with the knowledge that their striving is tethered to something eternal.

The third task is to *Engage*. This is where the will comes alive. Engagement is not just about behavioral activation. It is the spiritual and volitional practice of saying ‘yes’ to God in the face of hardship. Kroll’s (2025) emphasis on self-regulation is vital here, but missional therapy goes even further. Engagement means discerning and enacting God’s will, even when the personal cost is high. It is where the will matures through practice: setting goals, delaying gratification, resisting despair, and remaining faithful in adversity (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). The will, then, is not formed in the absence of suffering but through engagement with it. Missional engagement teaches that it is not in spite of our thorns but through them that we embody the call of God (Counted et al., 2024).

The final task is *Apply*—the outward expression of inward transformation. This is where flourishing manifests not as a static trait but as a lived testimony. In other words, will, at this phase, becomes witness. Individuals are invited to turn their healed pain into redemptive stories of purpose, serving others, leading from weakness, and living out their faith with integrity (Counted et al., 2024). In this phase, the will becomes embodied, not abstract; it is no longer a theoretical strength but a lived capacity to enact God’s mission in daily life. This is the essence of self-transcendent motivation, with the primary goal of living as a vessel of divine love and justice and not for oneself (Koltko-Rivera, 2006).

From the missional perspective, volition is central to the abundant life and Christian flourishing because it connects meaning with movement. It bridges the gap between belief and behavior, values and action, theology and therapy. Missional therapy teaches that people flourish when their will is aligned not merely with personal goals but with transcendent missional purpose. And this purpose is not just any higher aim, but rather is participation in the healing, reconciling work of God in the world (Counted et al., 2024).

Nonetheless, flourishing requires the ability to navigate moral complexity. The will is not only about choosing goals but about choosing rightly. As Kroll emphasized, volitional maturity includes the courage to act with moral integrity, even when values conflict or consequences are uncertain. Missional therapy echoes this very moral imperative, inviting individuals to cultivate the kind of missional wisdom that can discern and do the good, even when

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it is costly. Perhaps this is where missional discernment and volitional strength converge to form moral agency.

Therefore, volition and flourishing must be seen as developmental, not static. The will grows through stages, whether through hardship, failure, support, or grace. It is a muscle trained over time, and a *missio Dei* framework honors this journey by offering a redemptive arc rather than a prescriptive checklist. As proposed in earlier pages, missional therapy invites individuals to have volitional motivation that is not forged in ease but in the crucible of missional purpose. In this sense, will becomes both the pathway to missional flourishing and the fruit of a flourishing abundant life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the exercise of will is a central driver of human flourishing. It empowers individuals to pursue meaningful goals, adapt to adversity, regulate emotions, act with moral integrity, and align their lives with transcendent purposes. Kroll's framework, though it can be enriched by additional theoretical and empirical insights, rightly places volition at the heart of both psychological health and spiritual maturity. Therefore, Christian flourishing is not the absence of struggle but the presence of willful, purposeful engagement with life under God. Through the framework of missional therapy, the will is dignified, restored, and aligned with God's missional mandate. It becomes a way of participating in God's healing mission in the world by starting with one's own story, one person at a time.

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