Anne Conway and Henry More on Freedom

Jonathan Head, *Keele University* – ACCEPTED VERSION

**Abstract**

This paper seeks to shed light on the often-overlooked account of divine and human freedom presented by Anne Conway in her *Principles of the Most Ancient Modern Philosophy* (1690), partly through a comparison with the theory of freedom offered by her philosophical mentor, Henry More. After outlining More’s theory of freedom, explored in a number of different works, I argue that, given evidence from correspondence regarding Conway’s familiarity with More’s work, and the timing of the writing of the notes that would be compiled in the *Principles*, it is highly likely that she has his account of freedom in mind when she offers her own theory of divine and human freedom. Further, I argue that whilst they both agree in attributing substantive freedom to both God and human beings, the *Principles* crucially departs from More’s philosophy in refraining from limiting freedom to human beings alone but extending it to all creatures. However, I argue that the question of whether Conway follows More in allowing for the possibility of human beings to develop morally to the extent that they attain a good nature and no longer have indifference of the will in a strict sense is unclear.

**Keywords**

Anne Conway, Henry More, freedom, God

**1. Introduction**

The main aim of this paper is to examine Conway’s often-overlooked account of freedom.[[1]](#endnote-1) As an aid for reconstructing the brief account found in Conway’s *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (1690), I explore the manner and extent to which Conway adopts the account of freedom of her philosophical mentor, Henry More, who had presented his theory of freedom in *Enchiridion Ethicum* (1667). I argue that Conway’s treatment of human and divine freedom provides further evidence for her willingness to decisively depart from the views of her mentor, whilst also retaining some elements of his ethical theory.

I start the discussion proper with a consideration of the account of freedom presented by More in *Enchiridion Ethicum*. We will see that, with regard to divine freedom, More claims that there is no indifference to the divine will, and that it is constrained by its own nature in a manner that is logically prior to divine creative action. Further, in his account of human freedom, More distinguishes between those individuals who have indifference of the will (in the sense that a will is able to spontaneously act upon one intention rather than another in a given situation) and those who have attained a good nature such that they are constrained to do the right thing, in a manner analogous to the moral constraints upon divine action. I then will seek to reconstruct Conway’s account of divine and human freedom from the hints she gives in the *Principles*. I argue that, given evidence from correspondence regarding Conway’s familiarity with More’s work, and the timing of the writing of the notes that would be compiled in the *Principles*, it is highly likely that Conway had the account of freedom in More’s *Enchiridion Ethicum* in mind when she offers her own theory of divine and human freedom. We will see that Conway posits a stark distinction between human and divine freedom by claiming that God does not have the kind of indifference of will that is granted to us. When we come to compare Conway and More, we shall see that whilst they both agree in attributing substantive freedom to both God and human beings, the *Principles* departs from More’s philosophy in refraining from limiting freedom to human beings alone (as far as created beings are concerned), but extending it to all creatures.

**2. More on Divine and Human Freedom**

Let us begin by considering More’s account of divine freedom.[[2]](#endnote-2) First, More argues for constraints upon divine freedom (construed in a broadly libertarian sense)[[3]](#endnote-3) with regard to creation. In reflecting upon the divine attribute of omnipotence, in his *Divine Dialogues* (undertaken through the guise of the character, Philotheus), he argues that he ‘could yet never understand that the most omnipotent power that is imaginable can ever have a right to do what is wrong’ (1668, 23-24). More construes omnipotence as morally constrained, in that even an omnipotent being could not act against what is good, in addition to the usual caveats regarding logical possibility (such as God famously not being able to create a stone so heavy that God cannot lift it). Due to divine wisdom and goodness, God cannot, of necessity, act in any way other than doing that which is best, which fundamentally shapes all divine action with regard to the created universe (see More 1668, 24). More is clear that there is no indifference to the divine will, as God’s goodness is ‘so perfect, immutable and permanent’, that he cannot be in a state of ‘supine indifferency, to be carried otherwise than to what is the best’ (1668, 24-25).

More's account of divine freedom is shaped by the influence of neo-Platonism on his thought. As John Henry notes, More had a ‘belief in the inherent order in the nature of things which dictated to God the essential nature of the world that must be created’ (1990, 65). An essential part of the constraints upon divine freedom lie in essential truths regarding the nature of things that (at least conceptually) hold prior to God’s creative act, which fellow Cambridge Platonist, George Rust, glosses as ‘mutual respects and relations eternal and immutable, and in order of nature antecedent to any understanding created or uncreated’ (1682, 166). God grasps these essential truths and undertakes creative activity on that basis to bring about that which is the best. What would be best for God to do, then, is set prior to any exercise of divine will: given such truths, and the nature of the divine attributes, there is only one way in which God could have acted. Hence, a kind of necessity attaches to divine freedom, stemming from the interplay of essential truths and the divine attributes of omnipotence, wisdom and perfect benevolence. However, that is not to say that More denies that there is divine freedom (for example, More writes of God acting ‘freely, wise, and benign’ (1679, 101 – quoted in Reid 2012, 341); God is still free, even though there is, by necessity, only one way in which he can act.

Having considered More’s account of divine freedom, we can now move to examine his theory of human freedom. Before his more extended treatment of human freedom in the *Enchiridion*, More had briefly characterised this notion in *The Immortality of the Soul[[4]](#endnote-4)* as part of a critique of Hobbes, whose philosophy had been taken to have troubling consequences for the possibility of human freedom. In *Leviathan,* Hobbes argues for a strict materialism concerning human beings, speaking of the notion of incorporeal substances, such as the individual soul, as ‘insignificant sounds’ that ‘signify nothing at all’ (1985, 4.20-1; 108). More's worry is that without an immaterial soul, a human being would be a mere mechanical being, subject to the necessarily operating mechanical laws of nature alone, and so could not be genuinely free (see *Immortality*, 65-70). It seems to be an intrinsic part of the notion of free action (at least for human beings) that we could have acted otherwise:[[5]](#endnote-5) for example, I can be said to be freely typing this sentence partly (or maybe entirely) because I could have been doing something else right now, such as drinking the coffee sat by my computer. However, if I am entirely subject to the operation of the laws of nature, then it seems that none of my actions could have been otherwise: given the total state of the universe at a particular moment, plus the operation of the laws of nature, the next total state of the universe necessarily follows. Having an individual soul was supposed to safeguard our freedom,[[6]](#endnote-6) insofar as there is a part of the human individual that lies outside of the necessary workings of the laws of nature, and is somehow able to have an effect upon the material universe such that we can genuinely claim that our actions within it could genuinely have been otherwise. Hobbes’ refusal to countenance immaterial souls, or any kind of incorporeal substance, indeed formed part of his denial of free will, in the sense of a libertarian freedom described by Robert Kane as “the power of agents to be the ultimate creators (or originators) and sustainers of their own ends or purposes” (1996, 4). Hobbes argues instead for a weaker form of freedom as self-determination, construed as not being hindered from doing what we will (see Hobbes 1962, 51-2).[[7]](#endnote-7) In defence of his views concerning freedom, Hobbes had claimed that future events must be determined in advance, as it is either necessary that outcome A or not-A come to pass.[[8]](#endnote-8)

In opposition to Hobbes’ challenge to freedom of will, More argues that we do indeed have a power to determine ourselves to freely act in a particular way: ‘we are conscious to ourselves of that Faculty which the Greeks call *autexousion*, or *a Power in our selves*, notwithstanding any outward assaults or importunate temptations, *to cleave to that which is virtuous and honest, or to yield to pleasures or other vile advantages*’ (*Immortality*, 69-70). More sees human beings as torn between virtue as ‘an intellectual Power of the Soul’ and ‘the animal Impressions of bodily Passions’ (1690, 11). Such a view, as Aaron Garrett notes, reflects the shared vision of the Cambridge Platonists, who wish to argue for the freedom of will (against Hobbes), whilst holding to ‘an intellectualist tradition stressing control of the passions by the intellect and that knowing the good to be necessary means doing the good’ (2013, 35). The control of the passions is necessary as we are subject both to the animal and intellectual sides of our nature. As Jasper Reid argues (see 2012, 369), More is more concerned with striking the right balance between the animal and the divine within us, rather than castigating our animal nature as inherently sinful.[[9]](#endnote-9) In *An Explanation of the Grand Mystery of Godliness*, More states that the animal life, and anything arising out of it, such as the animal passions, is without sin in itself (see 1708, 32). Nevertheless, we feel ourselves drawn between the two sets of motivations that we are presented with by these two aspects of us: on the one hand, the self-love of the animal passions, and on the other, the virtues of the life lived in obedience to God (see More 1708, 37). The very possibility of our having *autexousion* is grounded in the fact that we have these two sets of motivations to choose between, and further, by freely choosing those motivations from the intellectual side of our nature, we are able to perfect ourselves. Animals, on the other hand, do not have such a freedom, as they only have the animal passions motivating them to action.

As evidence for the claim that we have a faculty of *autexousion*, More appeals to the fact that we have a sense of morality through our conscience, which he claims is ‘an evident and undeniable witness of [our free will]’ (*Immortality*, 70). In *An Antidote against Atheism*, he characterises such feelings of conscience as ‘a fear and confusion of mind arising from the presage of some mischief that may befall a man beside the ordinary course of nature, or the usual occurrences of affairs, because he has done thus or thus’ (1662, 29). More claims that our feelings of conscience are a truthful reflection regarding our capabilities, insofar as we would not have such a feeling if we did not have a genuinely free power to seek after good or evil in our actions: ‘as we feel the check of conscience after doing some things which were doubtingly acted, and without mature deliberation: even from hence it is manifest, that we sometimes act so, as that to have will’d and acted otherwise, was in our power. And this power, of abstaining from ill, is that very thing, which is truly called free-will’ (1690, 179-180).

Moving to More’s discussion in the *Enchiridion*, he begins by marking a parallel between divine and human freedom. He remarks that some would be ‘extremely scandalized’ by the question as to whether ‘virtue gets into men by custom, or by nature, or by some divine fate (which is the same as good fortune?)’, on the basis that ‘they judge a thing voluntarily done, to be of far different merit from what happens by compulsion’ (1690, 173). More argues, in contrast to this view, that we can be held to have freely done an action even under this kind of constraint (thus we could potentially distinguish between the unrestrained freedom originally granted by our capacity of *autexousion* and the morally constrained freedom of the virtuous). He points out that we do not see God’s actions as less free due to the moral constraints set by his nature (see More 1690, 173), and the analogy can be extended to humans also. Once an individual has acquired virtue (in whatever manner), More states that they become akin to God insofar as they become unable to act against their good nature: ‘whoever is good, either by nature or the divine fate, is also endowed with so true and efficacious a sense of honesty, that he can no more go against this sense, than that a sober man should stab himself with a dagger’ (1690, 173). In a sense, such people are constrained by their virtue to act in a certain way, but this does not mean that they have thereby lost their freedom. Virtuous individuals are esteemed by More as a kind of moral ‘hero’, someone who is at least analogous to God insofar as they have reached a state in which they are unable to act in an unethical manner. How strong the analogy is supposed to be is not entirely clear, but at the very least it seems that we can attain a state in which we are constrained by own nature to always do the right thing.[[10]](#endnote-10)

More’s position in this regard relies upon his underlying conception of virtue as a power, rather than an acquired habit (as might be claimed by an Aristotelian). He argues that virtue is not something that is necessarily brought about by the kind of process of habituation emphasised by the Aristotelian tradition: ‘a *habit* is not essential to virtue… For it is not the external causes, but the internal, which makes the essence of a thing’ (1690, 12). Elsewhere, he writes in a similar vein, ‘tho *habit* be a sort of *power*, arising from exercise and custom; yet this very way and circumstance of acquiring virtue, is nothing material, as to the true nature of it. For if this *power* or *energy* be got within us, and operates in our souls as by a native spring or elasticity, what matter is it, whether it came by repeated actions, or by inspiration?’ (1690, 174). With a conception of virtue that disregards the influence of habit by focusing only on the power we have to self-determine (that is, to spontaneously determine the will through one motivation rather than another, regardless of the source of the motivation in question), More removes any doubts concerning moral luck and whether we can be held responsible for our virtuous nature gained through habituation: our will is free, regardless of how our virtuous nature came to be. Such a view seems to posit an analogy between divine freedom and that enjoyed by the virtuous individual, in that humans can (at least in principle) have an intrinsic virtuous nature such that their actions are morally constrained, and yet also still be genuinely free (and be held morally responsible for what they do).

However, despite the possibility of some people attaining virtue, More goes on to claim that most of us remain in a state that falls significantly short of such a goal. It is therefore required that such people be persuaded to adopt virtuous ways of living: ‘while they may exercise the liberty of their wills to either side, [they] should be urged and excited by all that can be said, to incline their wills to that side, where right reason, and a sense of their duty, calls them’ (1690, 174). If they can be exhorted in such a direction, then they ‘are enabled by a liberty in their wills, to shake off, and gradually destroy those ill desires, with which they are beset; and, by the help of heaven to assert that liberty, which is most suitable to a creature made by God’s image, and a partaker of divine sense’ (1690, 175). More expands upon his notion of free will, ‘the *having a power to act or not act within our selves*’, by contrasting that power with mere spontaneity or voluntariness, ‘a principle of acting within one’s self… what the Greeks call hecousion’ (1690, 176). Spontaneity itself is to be contrasted with acting from ignorance or some kind of external compulsion: ‘in the one case (that of *force*) the agent does not act from his own principles, but is compelled from without: In the other case (that of *ignorance*) tho he act from his own principle, yet he has no notice of the moral circumstances of the action, which if he had known, he would not have done that action’ (1690, 178).

So, to act from spontaneity is to act from a sufficient comprehension of the morally salient details of the situation, and to be acting without some form of overwhelming external compulsion forcing you to act in the way in which you act: in other words, a voluntary or spontaneous agent is an individual ‘whose principle of action is in himself, and who understands and takes cognizance of his own actions that the circumstances that relate to them’ (More 1690, 178*).* More argues that freedom of the will is a subset of voluntariness or spontaneity: ‘When we say that a man has *liberum arbitrium* or *free-will*, we add a particular difference to the general notion of *voluntariness*, that is to say we suppose he is such a voluntary agent, as can act and not act as he pleases: whereas to the being a voluntary agent, simply or generally speaking, there is no such difference required’ (1690, 177). Whilst a merely voluntary agent can act as they please, an agent with free will is in a position such that if they were to will the opposite course of action, they could do so. Returning to the question of those who have not attained virtue, such that it is possible that they could do either the right or wrong action in any particular situation, they can be said to have freedom of the will in the sense of liberum arbitrium: not only are they able to act as they please, but they have a capacity to undertake opposite courses of action, depending on what they will at that moment.

As a further part of his critique of Hobbes, More adds that even our determination of events through our free actions does not confer necessity on those events. As Reid notes, ‘When A (or, as it might be, not-A) was a freely chosen action, More felt that it would indeed be true that it would happen, and even true that it would be *made* to happen by something, but he believed that this ‘something’ was to be found in the spontaneous volitions of the agent. Since the agent *could* have chosen otherwise, his choice would not confer any genuine necessity onto the resulting event’ (2012, 180). It would be wrong, on this account, to hold that determination of events through our free actions confers any sort of necessity on the world (such events are still contingent, and genuinely could have been otherwise), and so we have freedom of the will, with no suggestion that events surrounding our free actions are necessitated.

Given our previous discussion, we can take the implication that those beings who have a good nature, such that they are morally constrained to do the right thing, do not have freedom of the will; however, their actions are still to be taken as voluntary, free, and the possible subject of moral judgement. It seems that our freedom of the will is both analogous to, as well as distinguishable from, that enjoyed by God: we undertake voluntary or spontaneous action, and in that sense we are free, but I have a free will in a sense not enjoyed by God, by which I am able to choose between that which is the right and the wrong thing to do. There is a significant sense, according to More, in which human and divine freedom can be distinguished: for those humans who have not achieved virtue, they have the capacity for an arbitrary will, which is not possible for a being, such as God, who is morally constrained by their good nature to always aim for that which is best in their actions. As More points out, the capacity of an arbitrary will cannot be a perfection, insofar as it can be used for both good and evil: ‘Now this power of not acting, when it regards those things which are base and dishonest, is a great perfection; But when it has respect to things that are noble and honest, ‘tis a great imperfection’ (1690, 179). As God, or the idealised virtuous human individual, perhaps, has a good nature such that they are morally constrained in their action, they do not have an arbitrary will, and this is simply part of their moral perfection. In fact, it is good that they do not have such a choice. However, such beings are still free, as they are acting voluntarily or spontaneously.

So, we can sum up More’s view concerning divine and human freedom in this way:

1. God, as a divinely omnipotent being, is both logically and morally constrained, and thus does not have indifference of the will.
2. Humans have a faculty of *autexousion*, which allows us to freely determine ourselves to particular courses of action.
3. This freedom of the will allows us to act spontaneously, without some form of overwhelming external compulsion.
4. Virtuous humans and God analogously have a state of morally constrained freedom, without an arbitrary will.

With all this in mind, we can now go on to consider Conway’s own account of the freedom of God and creatures.

**3. Comparing More and Conway on Freedom**

In this section, I explore the account of human and divine freedom offered in the *Principles*, before comparing and contrasting this with More’s account. Conway almost certainly read *Enchiridion Ethicum* soon after publication, in the late 1660s. More clearly implies, in a letter from 27th March 1668, that he had already sent an early copy of the work for Conway’s perusal: ‘I am solicitous that neither [the *Divine Dialogues*] nor the *Enchiridion* [*Ethicum*] I sent you before may give occasion of intending your mind more then will consist with so much ease of your body as your pains will permit you’ (Nicolson and Hutton 1992, 293). Given that the notes that would later be compiled into the *Principles* were composed within the next decade, it is highly likely that the *Enchiridion*, including its account of freedom, would have been close to the forefront of Conway’s mind during that period. In addition, we know from the correspondence between More and Conway that she was familiar with all of More’s writings and often discussed them in detail with him.

In a similar manner to More, alongside outlining her views concerning human freedom, Conway offers reflections concerning divine freedom, which can be contrasted with that autonomy which is granted to us. She introduces the topic of divine freedom in the *Principles* through a presentation of her account of creation, which is clearly influenced by Platonist sources, such as the Cambridge Platonism of Henry More. It may seem at first as if Conway is willing to sacrifice the freedom of God, due to her views concerning divine creation. Though she states that ‘[all] creatures simply are and exist only because God wishes them to’ (*Principles*, 12)[[11]](#endnote-11), she nevertheless uses Neoplatonic imagery regarding the process of divine creation that may seem to imply a lack of freedom: ‘God is infinitely good, loving, and bountiful; indeed, he is goodness and charity itself, the infinite fountain and ocean of goodness, charity, and bounty. In what way is it possible for that fountain not to flow perpetually and to send forth living waters? For will not that ocean overflow in its perpetual emanation and continual flux for the production of creatures?’ (*Principles*, 13). Such a use of emanationist imagery, in which the creative act is characterised as an overflowing of divine goodness, suggests a necessary, inescapable process, as opposed to the intentional act presupposed by the major theist traditions of the day. We could say that, under this view, God has voluntary agency in the sense that he has the capacity to act spontaneously, but does not enjoy indifference of the will, such that it is possible that he would be able to do anything other than what he does.

However, it becomes clear that the use of such imagery should not be taken too strictly, in that its talk of necessity should not be taken as implying a denial of divine freedom: ‘God is a most free agent and yet most necessary’ (*Principles*, 15). Conway reveals her main target to be the voluntarist theological tradition that attributes indifference of will to God, in the manner of Descartes, who had claimed a certain arbitrariness attaching to the divine will, which was unconstrained by any kind of prior framework of rationality and morality.[[12]](#endnote-12) In the *Sixth Replies*, Descartes claims that God’s will makes things true or false, and so there is no logically prior scheme of goodness or truth to which God’s will must conform (see 1984, 291).[[13]](#endnote-13) This view of God’s creative action is a radical rejection of any sense of necessity applied to divine action. Though Descartes’ voluntarism is a matter of on-going scholarly debate,[[14]](#endnote-14) the traditional interpretation of Descartes on this matter is reflected by Frankfurt, who argues that the Cartesian view holds that God’s freedom consists in absolute indifference of the will: ‘Since there *are* no truths prior to God’s creation of them, His creative will cannot be determined or even moved by any considerations of value or of rationality whatever… The divine will is, in other words, entirely arbitrary. There are no prior conditions of right or reason to which it must conform; indeed, there are none to which it might choose to conform’ (1977, 41).

Conway’s main argument against a voluntarist account of divine freedom centres on her view that indifference of the will is the sort of freedom that can only be imputed to creatures, and not the Creator. Indeed, an indifferent will, for Conway, is a sign of a being’s imperfection, and thus a perfect being such as God could not have such a freedom: ‘although the will of God is most free so that whatever he does in regard to his creatures is done without any external force or compulsion or without any cause coming from the creatures (since he is free and acts spontaneously in whatever he does), nevertheless, that indifference of acting or not acting can in no way be said to be in God, for this would be an imperfection and would make God like his corruptible creatures’ (*Principles*, 15). Freedom of the will, in the sense of an indifferent will, implies the possibility of a kind of change for that being that could potentially lead that creature away from perfection. For a being with an indifferent will, which has a capacity to choose between morally good and bad options for any morally salient action, there is an ongoing possibility that any of their volitions could result in a morally impermissible action and a decrease in perfection. Such a being (as ourselves) is in contrast to one whose nature is such that these kind of volitions are not possible for them: these potential bad options for action do not even occur to them. There is only one way they can act, and that is to always do the right thing, so there is no indifferency in their will and no possibility of moral backsliding or a decrease in perfection. For this reason, an indifferent will is the mark of an imperfect being. God, a perfect, immutable being, could never decrease in perfection, and so cannot have this sort of freedom.

Further on, Conway expands upon her understanding of God’s freedom as lacking indifference of the will: ‘true justice or goodness has no latitude or indifference in itself but is like a straight line drawn from one point to another, where it is impossible to have two or more equally straight lines between two points, because only one line can be straight and all others must be more or less curved to the extent that they depart from that straight line’ (*Principles*, 16). As God is uniquely perfect, there is no question of him acting in any other way than how he chooses to act, and in that sense the divine will is not indifferent, and divine actions are necessary: ‘[God] must do whatever he does to and for his creatures since his infinite wisdom, goodness, and justice are a law to him which cannot be superseded’ (*Principles*, 16). Divine action is necessary, as it will always follow in line with the perfection of God’s wisdom, and yet free insofar as he is a transcendent self-mover, unaffected by any external compulsion. So, God’s perfect goodness, for Conway, has the implication that there can be no such thing as divine indifference of the will, contradicting the traditional understanding of Descartes’ account of divine freedom and the creation of necessary truths. In light of the preceding discussion, we can readily see that there is apparently little substantive difference between More and Conway on the question of divine freedom, insofar as they posit that God has no indifference of the will, and thus seems to have (due to divine perfect nature) a kind of freedom not enjoyed by human beings. As such, I argue that it is on questions of human and creaturely freedom that Conway begins to decisively depart from the account proposed by her mentor.

Turning to creatures, as we might expect, Conway claims that they have an entirely different sort of freedom than that enjoyed by God, in that they have indifference of will and he does not. In fact, it is our indifferent wills that allow us to engage in moral development and corruption, in a manner that would not be possible for a perfect being. As Lacano rightly points out, for Conway, God grants creatures indifference of the will as part of his creative project to communicate his goodness as much as he can (see 2017, 170). By granting creatures indifference of the will, we are able to morally develop ourselves and thereby also communicate goodness to others. There seems to be some inevitability, however, that an indifferent will may be used for evil, in that we are led to ‘often [act] from pure will but without any true and solid reason or the guidance of wisdom’ (*Principles*, 15). Conway is therefore claiming that it is possible that the indifferent will be able to act in one way or another. However, epistemic factors, including lack of understanding of the salient facts of the situation or an incorrect assessment of what possible course of action best promotes the good, sometimes leads the indifferent will astray.

Conway adds that any view that would attribute such a will to God would make him potentially like ‘those cruel tyrants in the world who do most things from their own pure will, relying on their power, so that they are unable to give any explanation for their actions other than their own pure will’ (*Principles*, 15)*.* The faculty of an indifferent will allows the being that has it to potentially act on the basis of a bad reason, something that is in some sense false, not ‘solid’ or wise. It seems that a reason could be bad in the sense of confused or unclear for Conway, as she states that a ‘good man is able to give a suitable explanation for what he does or will do because he understands that true goodness and wisdom require that he do so’ (*Principles*, 15-16). The individual who acts well will be acting upon a clear, good reason that they can at least potentially communicate to others, and we could therefore perhaps use the ability to communicate one’s reasons for action as a test for whether one is acting rightly or not. Doing the right thing involves being able to disclose and explain oneself, showing that you are acting upon a reason that is clear to you as the right thing to do (in this way, being epistemically is complementary to acting well).

On this basis, we can see the reason why Conway holds that having indifference of will, a faculty that God does not have, nevertheless makes us less free, because in a sense we are inhibited from doing the right thing by being presented with bad or confused reasons for action. In this regard, Conway seems to be following a generally Platonic-Socratic view that wrong-doing is due to ignorance or confusion (see, for example, Plato’s *Meno* (2005, 77b6-78b2)). As all beings naturally desire that which is good, the only explanation for their doing wrong will be confusion or ignorance about what is truly good: in other words, cognitive error is the basis of moral error. As Conway is following such a view, it is clear why indifference of the will, which allows us to be confronted with bad or confused reasons, inhibits our freedom, insofar as it gets in the way of our always choosing the good.

So, God is metaphysically constrained by his nature to always do that which is best, although in a manner which is not incompatible with a distinctively divine kind of freedom. As Lascano notes, for Conway, God’s freedom is safeguarded by the fact that he is not under any kind of external compulsion to act in the way he does; rather, his will “is always completely determined by his perfect reason, wisdom, and goodness” (2017, 165) and so perhaps we could say that the divine will is internally compelled in this manner. On the other hand, human beings are not constrained in such a manner, and so have indifference of the will. We are thus able to act upon both good and bad or confused reasons. Being presented with bad or confused reasons inhibits our freedom, though, as we are offered a distorted view of how to achieve that which is best for us. Conway’s emphasis upon ethical disclosure on the part of good human beings, however, does not necessarily imply that God could (and should) disclose his purposes to us, even though he would always act upon true, ‘solid’ and wise intentions. Whilst human beings need to be tested for right reasons, faith in God’s goodness would negate any such need with regard to the divine, and it would be hubristic anyway to expect God to disclose himself in such a manner.

Having now reviewed the respective accounts of human and divine freedom offered by Conway and More, we can see that (at least at first glance) there is remarkable agreement between the two, as befitting their collaborative relationship, and the increasing recognition of Conway as an important part of the Cambridge Platonist school. Both affirm that God and humans are free in significant ways. In fact, they can be said to have an analogous freedom in the sense of voluntariness or self-moving spontaneity (though, admittedly, this parallel is not something that is explored by Conway). More and Conway both point to external compulsion and ignorance as salient characteristics of an unfree action. Conway, as we have seen, does talk about unwise or confused reasons hindering our freedom in some sense, which would perhaps involve reasons forced upon us by external compulsion and ignorance, and so it seems that she is quite close to More on this point.

However, there is at least one major difference between More and Conway on the question of divine and human freedom. More’s account of creaturely freedom is explicitly tied to that of human beings, whilst Conway offers an account of creaturely freedom, which is not limited to human beings, but rather applies to all created beings. In order to see why she is compelled to do this, and why she may want to hold such a position, we need to briefly review further details of her system. One of Conway’s major claims is that body and spirit lie on a continuum, such that ‘[every] body can change into a spirit and every spirit into a body because the distinction between body and spirit is only one of mode, not essence’ (*Principles*, 41). The potential transmutation of beings is connected by Conway to moral considerations, such that as one morally develops, one becomes more spirit but conversely, if a creature does evil, then it becomes more body. God’s perfection and status as infinite spirit, naturally join together, because one’s moral perfection is tied to your position on the spirit-matter continuum. A creature who approaches perfection will naturally become more spirit: ‘There are many degrees of this so that any thing can approach or recede more or less from the condition of a body or spirit. Moreover, because spirit is the more excellent of the two in the true and natural order of things, the more spiritual a certain creature becomes…, the closer it comes to God, who… is the highest spirit’ (*Principles*, 42). Questions of freedom, morality and salvation are, for Conway, not limited to human beings, but are extended to all creatures, who are all equally mutable in terms of the spirit-body continuum, and have the possibility of approaching perfection through becoming less crass and more spiritual.

As an example of this process in action, Conway writes of ‘a human being [who] has so greatly degraded himself by his own wilful wrongdoing and has brought his nature, which had been so noble, to a lower state’, being punished by God by being compelled ‘to bear the same image in his body as in that spirit into which he has internally transformed himself’ (*Principles*, 36). In other words, through our wrongdoing as human beings, it is possible that we could (in a future life) be put into the body of a beast, though with the possibility of later continuing our moral development: indeed, Conway is committed to this possibility due to her universalist theory of salvation. Confirming her retreat from an anthropocentric approach, Conway triumphantly proclaims that salvation will ultimately be achieved for all creatures: ‘[The] grace of God will prevail over judgement and judgement turn into victory for the salvation and restoration of [all] creatures’ (*Principles*, 37). As we saw earlier, More holds that animals do not have freedom in the sense enjoyed by humans, insofar as they are only presented with one set of motivations grounded in their brutish nature. As such, animals do not have indifference of will and cannot engage in self-perfection through acting on the right motivations. In this way, we have an important aspect in which Conway departs from More, insofar as she brings all creatures into the sphere of freedom and the possibility, through action on good or confused reasons, of moral development.[[15]](#endnote-15)

One major point of comparison between More and Conway on this topic revolves around the possibility of the moral development of humans to the point where they have a good nature, such that they can no longer be said to have the metaphysical capacity of an indifferent will. Conway argues that spirit and matter lie on a continuum, in such a way that we can think of matter as condensed spirit (see *Principles*, 42). Furthermore, creatures have multiple lives, which allows them to exist in different forms on the spirit-matter continuum (see *Principles*, 43). Given that God is on one end of the spirit-matter continuum, as both the purest spirit and the morally perfect being, we can think of moral development and movement on the spirit-matter continuum as two sides of the same coin: a creature that develops morally will eventually find themselves in a higher, more incorporeal form of existence. As we have seen, More allows the possibility for a free human being to morally develop in such a way that they lose indifference of the will. Whilst Conway, for her part, allows for the possibility of moral backsliding, understood as moving away from spirit to body on the continuum, she also incorporates an account of perpetual virtue into her ethical theory: one could achieve a good nature in the sense that a substantial change in the individual, such as losing the capacity of an indifferent will, might come about. Conway is clear that the development of the creature towards perfection is an infinite process - ‘a body is always able to become more and more spiritual to infinity since God, who is the first and highest spirit, is infinite and does not and cannot partake of the least corporeality’ (*Principles*, 42) - but there still is space for what we may call a creaturely good nature or character within her ethical theory. Conway describes the state of perpetual virtue as a ‘pristine state of goodness’, from which a creature ‘can never fall again’ (*Principles*, 42). In a comment reminiscent of More in *Enchiridion Ethicum*, she states that a perpetually virtuous has used their indifferent will to “[rise] until it only wishes to be good and is incapable of wishing any evil’ (*Principles*, 42). In terms of postulating a point in the moral and spiritual development of the creature at which perpetual virtue is achieved, Conway states that they become like Christ, though ‘inasmuch as we are only creatures, our relation to him is only one of adoption’ (*Principles*, 22).

These comments by Conway leaves us with two questions: 1) what is meant by being ‘adopted’ by Christ, and 2) when a creature has risen to this state, do they still have an indifferent will (but they always choose the good), or have they essentially lost it (insofar as confused or unwise reasons for action are no longer presented to them)? To answer these questions, we need to consider Conway’s notion of Christ as a distinct type of being, standing between God and creatures. What makes Christ, understood as a kind of being in this way, ontologically distinctive is that (unlike God) Christ can undergo change, but (unlike creatures) can only change towards the good, that is, become more perfect: ‘The creatures could not be equal to Christ nor of the same nature because his nature could never degenerate like theirs and change from good into bad’ (*Principles*, 22). In order to explain this difference further, Conway posits that Christ and creatures have two different powers of change: ‘One has the intrinsic power of changing itself either for good or bad, and this is common to all creatures, but not the first born of all creatures. The other kind of change is the power of moving only from one good to another’ (*Principles*, 24).[[16]](#endnote-16)

As I have suggested elsewhere (Head, 2017), a straightforward way of construing how creatures can become like Christ, who can only move towards perfection, would be that they join with him on the development towards divine perfection, and reach such a scale on that infinite journey that they are no longer prey to the kind of moral backsliding we discussed earlier. As Conway puts it, ‘those who achieve a perfect union with Christ are raised to a region of perfect tranquillity, where nothing is seen or felt to move or be moved. For although the strongest and swiftest motions exist there, nevertheless because they move so uniformly, equally, and harmoniously, without any resistance or disturbance, they appear completely at rest’ (*Principles*, 27). Such creatures, who have achieved this point in the development towards perfection, become at one with Christ in the sense that they join with him on the spiritual journey towards God without any moral backsliding. Given this, we could potentially construe such creatures as themselves losing indifference of the will in a manner analogous to those human beings, as postulated by More, who have achieved a good nature and are compelled to follow it. In this regard, then, we can say that there is in fact a hidden similarity between More and Conway on this point. However, I do not believe we should read Conway in this manner, as she is clear that our power of change is what distinguishes us as the kind of being we are. As such, it would be implausible to read Conway as allowing for creatures to undergo such a substantive change that they undergo a loss of the indifference of the will. Using the language of ‘adoption’, regarding our possible enhanced relation to Christ, suggests a loose connection to him, insofar as we only change for the good, but does not imply anything more radical than that in terms of our freedom. Thus, even those creatures who have grown in virtue and spirituality such that they become ‘adopted’ by Christ still retain indifference of the will.

**4. Conclusion**

We have seen that Conway offers an account of freedom that marks a departure from that suggested by More in the *Enchiridion Ethicum*, but nevertheless still shows signs of the influence of her philosophical mentor. More and Conway are both concerned with rejecting what they see as unacceptable aspects of some of the most influential traditions of thought concerning freedom at the time, including materialism and Cartesianism. More attacks materialist views as undermining the reality of human freedom, whilst Conway wishes to avoid theories of divine freedom that do not do justice to the perfect goodness of God, as she sees it. In exploring both Conway’s and More’s theories, I have attempted to take a balanced approach to the question of More’s influence on Conway, taking into account both the importance of his mentorship and the radical nature of the philosophical system that is suggested in the *Principles*. Unlike More, Conway seeks to shape her account of freedom around the ontological framework she establishes to capture the distinction between an immutable God and a corrupted, constantly changing creation that can nevertheless begin to approach unchanging perfection. Conway and More both distinguish divine freedom from human/creaturely freedom, on the basis of the capacity of an indifferent will. The universalist scheme of salvation proposed by Conway in the *Principles*, however, mark decisive differences between them on questions concerning freedom and morality, particularly with regard to the moral development and salvation of all creatures. The question of the attainment of perpetual virtue is also an interesting point of comparison between them: Conway clearly states that we can achieve such a state, and it is likely that she thinks that this can be done whilst retaining indifference of the will, whilst More hints at such a possibility but does not expand upon this in great detail. As such, it may be that there is ultimately little difference between them on this question.

We therefore see Conway offering a distinctive account of divine and creaturely freedom that marks another aspect of her rejection of Cartesianism, as well as the influence of the Cambridge Platonist philosophy of Henry More. Though her philosophy is shaped by her Cartesian education and her interactions with More, she nevertheless constructs her own remarkable system that departs from that of her mentor and other philosophical influences, and we can particularly see that here in her extension of freedom to all creatures. As our understanding of both Conway’s and More’s philosophies grow, we will be able to engage in even deeper comparative research on these two figures, which will mutually shed further light on their fascinating works.[[17]](#endnote-17)

**Bibliography**

Byrne, David. 2016. “Ragley Hall and the Decline of Cartesianism”. *Restoration* 40 (2): 43-57.

Conway, Anne. 1996. *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, edited by Coudert and Corse, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Crocker, Robert. 2003. *Henry More, 1614-1687: A Biography of the Cambridge Platonist*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.

Descartes, René. 1984. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume 2*, trans. Cottingham, Stoothoff & Murdoch, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Frankfurt, Harry. 1977. “Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths”. *The Philosophical Review* 86 (1): 36-57.

Garrett, Aaron. 2013. “Seventeenth-Century Moral Philosophy: Self-Help, Self-Knowledge, and the Devil’s Mountain”. In *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Ethics*, edited by Roger Crisp, 229-279. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Glanvill, Joseph. 1662. *Lux Orientalis, or, An Enquiry into the Opinion of the Eastern Sages concerning the Praeexistence of Souls*. London.

Head, Jonathan. 2017. “Anne Conway on Time, the Trinity, and Eschatology”. *Philosophy and Theology* 29 (2): 277-295.

Henry, John. 1990. “Henry More versus Robert Boyle: the Spirit of Nature and the Nature of Providence”. In *Henry More (1614-1687): Tercentenary Studies*, edited by Sarah Hutton, 55-76. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Hobbes, Thomas. 1962. *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes: Vol. 5*. London: Scientia Aalen.

Hobbes, Thomas. 1985. *Leviathan*. London: Penguin.

Hutton, Sarah. 1996. “Henry More and Anne Conway on Preexistence and Universal Salvation”. In *Mind Senior to the World: Stoicismo e origenismo nella filosofila platonica del seicento inglese*, edited by M. Baldi, 113-26. Milan: Francoangeli.

Hutton, Sarah. 2004. *Anne Conway: A Woman Philosopher*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hutton, Sarah. 2005. “Women Philosophers and the Early Reception of Descartes: Anne Conway and Princess Elizabeth”. In *Receptions of Descartes: Cartesianism and Anti-Cartesianism in Early Modern Europe*, edited by Tad M. Schmaltz, 3-21. London: Routledge.

Kane, Robert. 1996. *The Significance of Free Will*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kaufman, Dan. 2003. “Infimus gradus libertatis? Descartes on Indifference and Divine Freedom”. *Religious Studies* 39 (4): 391-406.

Lascano, Marcy P. 2017. “Anne Conway on Liberty’” In *Women and Liberty, 1600-1800: Philosophical Essays*, edited by Broad and Detlefsen, 163-177. Oxford: OUP.

Mawson, T.J. 2001. “Eternal Truths and Cartesian Circularity”. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 9 (2): 197-220.

McRobert, Jennifer. 2000. “Anne Conway’s Vitalism and Her Critique of Descartes”. *International Philosophical Quarterly* 40 (1): 21-35.

More, Henry. 1642. *Psychathanasia Platonica: Or A Platonicall Poem of the Immortality of Souls, especially Mans Soul*. Cambridge: R. Daniel.

More, Henry. 1662. *A Collection of Several Philosophical Writings*. London: J. Flesher.

More, Henry. 1668. *Divine Dialogues Containing Sundry Disquisitions & Instructions Concerning the Attributes and Providence of God*: *Volume 2*. London: J. Flesher.

More, Henry. 1679. *Cantabrigiensis Opera Philosophica: Volume 2*. London: J. Maycock for J. Martyn & W. Kettilby.

More, Henry. 1682. *Annotations upon the Two Foregoing Treatises, Lux Orientalis… and the Discourse of Truth*. London: J. Collins.

More, Henry. 1690. *An Account of Virtue, or, Dr. Henry More’s Abridgement of Morals put into English*. London: B. Tooke.

More, Henry. 1708. *Theological Works*. London: Joseph Downing.

Nicolson, Marjorie Hope and Sarah Hutton, eds. 1992. *The Conway Letters*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Pink, Thomas. 2011. “Thomas Hobbes and the Ethics of Freedom”. *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 54 (5): 541-563.

Plato. 2005. *Meno and Other Dialogues* (trans. Waterfield). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Reid, Jasper. 2012. *The Metaphysics of Henry More*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Rust, George. 1682. *A Discourse of Truth*. London: J. Collins.

van Mill, David. 1995. “Hobbes’s Theories of Freedom”. *The Journal of Politics* 57 (2): 443-459.

Ward, Richard. 2000. *The Life of Henry More*, edited by Hutton et al., Dordrecht: Kluwer.

1. One notable exception to this scholarly omission is Lascano (2017). Whilst Lascano does briefly discuss the relationship between More and Conway on freedom (see 2017: 168-169), I wish to explore this relation in more detail. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Most recent major studies of Henry More’s philosophy mainly overlook his theory of freedom, though a notable exception is Reid (2012, 179-181 *et passim*) and I will have cause to consider his account later in the discussion. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. By a broad ‘libertarian’ understanding of freedom, I understand a power to self-determine without external influence. Beginning with this notion of freedom is apt as it is a kind of freedom often attributed to God, and as Reid points out (2012, 179), More is committed to a strongly libertarian approach to freedom throughout his philosophy. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. References to *The Immortality of the Soul* are to Henry More. 1662. *A Collection of Several Philosophical Writings*. London: J. Flesher, hereafter cited in the text as “*Immortality*”, followed by page number. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. We do not have to think of freedom primarily in this way, but it is a useful approach to capture common-sense notions related to freedom, and it is how the debate was often framed in the 17th century. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. As Crocker notes, More strikes a contrast between a free spiritual world and the material realm: he proposes ‘a simple vision of the primal intellectual dichotomy between the intelligence, freedom and bliss of spirit, and the deadness, immobility, ephemeral nature and “otherness” of materiality’ (2003, 37). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See Pink (2011, 543-545) for a more in-depth examination of Hobbes’ account of freedom in the sense of self-determination. It is also worth noting that Hobbes speaks of free action in the sense of action that is unimpeded, which is compatible with a will that is always determined to a particular course of action (see van Mill 1995, 444-446). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See Reid (2012, 180) for a fuller explanation of Hobbes’ argument concerning the determinate necessity of future events. I cannot expand upon More’s reaction, also recounted by Reid, to this specific argument in detail due to space constraints. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. More’s rejection of any view that sees animal nature as inherently sinful is at least partly inspired by his early repudiation of Calvinism, which emphasises the complete moral infirmity of the soul due to original sin and thus our complete reliance on grace for salvation (see More’s autobiographical remarks concerning his Calvinist education and his reaction against it in Ward 2000, 15-17). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. It was suggested by an anonymous reviewer that More could be simply claiming that a good person will not choose the bad as long as they are a good person, whilst leaving open the possibility that such an individual could morally ‘backslide’ to being a bad person again. The main point I would raise against this reading is that More is clearly taking about the possibility of action being compelled by one’s nature, in the manner that God cannot do anything other than pursue the good. Such a position seems to suggest a kind of perpetual virtue, for if one has achieved that state, how *could* one morally backslide? If we do morally backslide, then we have clearly not yet reached the point where we are being compelled by our own good nature. Granted, the text here is not decisive, but it is difficult to see why More would invoke the analogy with divine action here if one does not follow my interpretation of this passage. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. References to Anne Conway. 2006. *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, are hereafter cited in the text as “*Principles*”, followed by page number. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. The voluntarist approach can be contrasted with the intellectualist view that Conway propounds, which claims that divine agency is determined by a recognition of that which is good. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Conway’s critique of Descartes in the *Principles* is discussed by McRobert (2000), who focuses on the dispute between vitalism and a mechanistic view of nature. With regard to Descartes’ conception of God, McRobert sees little distance between Conway and Descartes, stating that she ‘openly admires the characterization of God which Descartes gives… agreeing explicitly with his description of God’s nature’ (2000, 26). In contrast to this view, I argue that Conway’s account of divine freedom is another aspect of her departure from Cartesianism. For further reflections on Conway’s response to Cartesianism, see Hutton (2005) and Byrne (2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See e.g. Mawson (2001) and Kaufman (2003), for differing views on the nature of Cartesian indifference. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. For more on Conway and More’s approaches to the question of salvation, see Hutton (1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. The question of the precise nature of Christ’s freedom is not one that I can explore further here, due to space constraints. However, given the ontological difference between God, Christ and creatures, the nature of Christ’s freedom does not necessarily have an impact on how we understand divine and creaturely freedom (which is the focus of this paper) in the context of Conway’s philosophy. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. I would like to thank Alissa MacMillan, Ruth Boeker, anonymous reviewers for this journal, and an audience at University College Dublin for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)