

Anne Conway on Liberty

Marcy P. Lascano

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2.1 Introduction

Anne Conway claims that if we consider God’s wisdom and goodness, we can ‘refute and eliminate that indifference of will which the Scholastics and those falsely called Philosophers believe to be in God and which they incorrectly call free will’.¹ According to Conway, God is ‘both a most free agent and a most necessary one’ (*P* III.2, 16). She claims that God’s will is necessitated by his goodness and wisdom to act in accordance with moral duty and justice. God is also most free in that his actions are done without external force or compulsion (they are done spontaneously). However, God’s being completely just requires that his will be completely determined by his wisdom and goodness. Given Conway’s account of God’s freedom (that his will is determined by the greatest good), we might expect her account of human, or creaturely, freedom to be the same. But because creatures are not perfect immutable beings, their will is subject to error and sin. According to Conway, the will of

¹ Anne Conway, *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, translated and edited by Allison Coudert and Taylor Corse (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), chapter III, section 1, p. 15. Hereafter all references to Conway’s *Principles* will be to this edition, indicated in-text by *P* followed by chapter, section, and page numbers.

created beings is directed towards the good in general, but sometimes fails to choose the best.² Created beings have indifference of will, which affords them the ability to act or not act in accordance with the best. Her account of creaturely indifference of will raises a number of important questions for her philosophical system. First, why would God create beings with indifference of will, which is, as Conway maintains, an ‘imperfection’? If God is good and always does the best for his creation, why would he create beings with the ability to knowingly or mistakenly choose what is not good? Second, how is it that beings naturally inclined to goodness are actually able to choose evil? Finally, what are the metaphysical and moral implications of indifference of will? These concerns will take us into Conway’s theodicean project, allowing us to explore Conway’s views concerning God’s justice and creaturely redemption. I will argue that Conway’s view of creaturely freedom results from the nature of created beings and plays an important role in Conway’s views concerning love, sin, and salvation.

The plan for the chapter is as follows. First, I explain Conway’s account of God’s freedom and the indifference of will in created beings. I then discuss Conway’s views of morality, her action theory, and her accounts of sin, punishment, and salvation. However, before I discuss Conway’s account of freedom, I will first say a few things about her general metaphysical commitments.

² Leibniz held this view. God, as the moral exemplar, is completely determined in his will/actions by reason and goodness. Creatures, likewise, are determined by their understanding and goodness. However, as limited beings, creatures are often mistaken in what is good. See Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*, edited by Austin Farrar and translated by E. M. Huggard (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1952), pp. 143, 148, 236-7, for example.

2.2 The Nature of Substances and Freedom of the Will

2.2.1 *The Nature of Substances*

In order to better understand Conway's account of freedom, we must first briefly sketch her ontology. According to Conway, all things are spirit.³ Spirit is alive and perceptive and comes in degrees of lightness (and darkness), subtlety (and crassness), extension, and penetrability. She claims that everything is 'spirit, life, and light, by which I mean [it has] the capacity for every kind of feeling, perception, or knowledge, even love, all power and virtue, joy and fruition, which the noblest creatures have or can have, even the vilest and most contemptible' (*P IX.6, 66*).

Conway posits three substances: God, Christ (middle spirit), and creation. Each of these substances is essentially spirit. However, each substance is differentiated with respect to its mutability. Conway argues that God is perfect and immutable. Since God cannot create another God, anything he creates must be mutable. However, there are two types of mutable nature that it is possible for God to create: (1) something whose nature it is to change only for the better, and (2) something whose nature is to change for better or worse. According to Conway, it is not possible for God to create something whose nature it is to change only for the worse. Conway believes this is so for two reasons: first, it is inconsistent with God's

³ One might argue that Conway is an idealist given her ontology of spiritual substance. However, Conway holds that spirit is capable of manifesting all the properties typically associated with body, such as hardness, solidity, and darkness. It is for this and other reasons that I deny that she is an idealist.

goodness to create something whose nature it is to be more and more evil *ad infinitum*; and second, it is inconsistent with God's justice that any creature fail to be redeemed. Moreover, since evil is a type of privation for Conway, a purely evil being would be nothing, which is impossible.⁴ Since God always does as much as he can, God makes both of the possible mutable substances: (1) Christ, or middle spirit, which changes only for the better, and (2) creation, which can change for better and for worse.⁵

According to Conway, creation is composed of an infinite number of spirits, or monads, which are organized into various forms, including minds and bodies in the case of human beings.⁶ The individuals that exist are merely modes of the one created substance. She writes,

all creatures, or the whole of creation, are also a single species in substance or essence, although it includes many individuals gathered into subordinate species and distinguished from each other modally but not substantially or essentially. (*P VI.4*, 31)

With these views in place, we may now turn to her account of freedom.

2.2.2 God's Free Will

⁴ Conway ascribes to the great chain of being with God at the top. God is the most real, full, or perfect being. Lack of perfection is a privation of being, which places one lower on the chain. Thus, to lack all perfection is to have no being—to be nothing.

⁵ Although Conway has novel and interesting views on the nature and role of Christ as mediator, I will largely ignore these issues for the purposes of this paper.

⁶ Note that for Conway, both mind (soul) and body are made of spirit. According to Conway, body is merely condensed and dark spirit.

Conway's account of freedom begins with the way in which God is free. She argues that once we consider the nature of God, we will see that there can be no indifference of will in his case.⁷ She writes,

For 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. (*P* III.1, 15)

Conway claims that God is both 'a most free agent and a most necessary one' (*P* III.2, 16). God's will is free in that he is not forced or compelled by any outside force or entity. His will and action (one and the same for God) originate from within him without any external interference; that is, they are spontaneous. However, God is also a most necessary agent in that his actions are not done from 'pure will'—without reason and wisdom—but rather his will is always completely determined by his perfect reason, wisdom, and goodness (*P* III.1, 15).

Conway argues that indifference of will is an imperfection because it implies mutability. Freedom of indifference allows one to will or choose what is good or true, or not.

⁷ For a helpful discussion of the way the terms "indifference," "spontaneity," "voluntary," and "Liberum Arbitrium" are used in the seventeenth century, see Robert Sleigh, Jr., Vere Chappell, and Michael Della Rocca's "Determinism and Human Freedom" in *The Cambridge History of 17th Century Philosophy*, edited by Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Conway claims that if God were able to act without wisdom and goodness, he would be like a tyrant who acts from power alone. She writes, ‘Yet, since any 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, he therefore wishes to act as he does because it is right and knows that if he does not, he will neglect his duty’ (*P* III.1, 15-16).

Conway equates God’s freedom with ‘true justice or goodness’, which she claims ‘has no latitude or indifference in itself’. She draws an analogy between right action and a straight line drawn between any two points—there can only be one. Following her analogy, we can infer that just as there is only one straight line between any two points, there is only one truly just or best action in any given situation. All other possible actions are less just and less good depending on how far they fall from the ideal. So, a morally perfect agent will always perform the best and most just action. Conway tells us that ‘since his infinite wisdom, goodness, and justice are a law to him which cannot be superseded’, God is necessitated to do the best (*P* III.2, 16).⁸

2.2.3 Creaturely Free Will

⁸ Here, Conway sides with the non-voluntarists concerning the Euthyphro dilemma. The dilemma concerns whether God does *x* because it is good, or if *x* is good because God does it. The voluntarist believes that God’s thoughts, beliefs, and actions are what determine the goodness of *x*. If God does *x*, then *x* is good. The non-voluntarist holds that there is some objective standard of goodness that God adheres to, and if *x* meets this standard, then God will do *x*. See Plato’s *Euthyphro*. For further discussion of intellectualism and voluntarism in this period, see Emily Thomas, ‘Creation, Divine Freedom, and Catharine Cockburn’ in this volume.

As noted above, it might seem surprising that Conway's account of free will is not the same for both God and created beings. However, it is clear that for Conway the way in which the will moves is determined by the nature of the being in question. God, as a perfect being, is incapable of any change, for any change in his will would result in either an improvement of his nature, which is impossible, or a lessening of his perfection, which is also impossible. Thus, since it is God's nature to be perfect, and therefore immutable, his wisdom, goodness, and will are eternal and unchanging modes of God.⁹ Creatures, of course, are not perfect. It is the nature of a creature to be always in motion or changing. Conway writes, 'In fact, since mutability is appropriate for a creature insofar as it is a creature ..., it appears that there is no other distinction between God and creatures. For if any creature, were by its nature, immutable, it would be God' (*P* VI.1, 29). The freedom of created beings to will or choose either good or evil is what facilitates this continual change. This indifference of will, according to Conway, 'is the *basis* for all mutability and corruptibility in creatures, so that there would be no evil in creatures if they were not mutable' (*P* III.1, 15; my emphasis). So, in order to create, God must make beings that are mutable and this mutability is based on a creature's ability to choose either good or evil. God does the best for his creatures and gives them the power and natural desire to seek their own good. However, it is always possible for a creature to choose evil over good. Conway writes,

⁹ 'And thus wisdom and will in God are not entities or substances distinct from him but, in fact, distinct modes or properties of one and the same substance' (*P* I.7, 10).

And this is the nature of all creatures, namely that they be in continual motion or operation, which most certainly strives for their further good (just as for the reward and fruit of their own labor), unless they resist that good by a willful [*voluntaria*] transgression and abuse of the impartial [*indifferentiae voluntatis*] will created in them by God. (*P* VI.6, 32)

We should note here that Conway calls the transgressions wilful or voluntary, and that they are also an abuse of the impartial or indifferent will that God has given us. Here, we see that Conway ascribes to humans the ability to act against their own good.

For Conway, good and evil are relative terms. What is good for one type of being, a horse, for example, is to have the virtues of a horse (obedience, speed, calmness of nature, and so on). What is good for a human being is to have the virtues associated with our sort of being (piety, holiness, kindness, honesty, and so on).¹⁰ Strictly speaking, no creature is evil since every creature shares in some of the attributes of God. However, creatures can choose to act in ways that are unbecoming of their natures, and this seems to be what Conway refers to when she says that they will evil. For instance, she claims that to act like a devil is to act with ‘hostility, malice, cruelty, fraud, and cunning’ and to act like a beast is to indulge our ‘lust and Earthly desires’ (*P* VI.10 and 8, 38 and 36). Sin, according to Conway, is ‘*ataxia*, or a disorderly direction of motion or the power of moving from its appropriate place or state to another’ (*P* XIII.2, 58). When we will something other than God, we sin. This motion is

¹⁰ While Conway does mention various virtues and seems to presuppose that some traditional Christian virtues are appropriate for human beings, she does not offer a moral theory in her work.

caused by willing to love that which is beneath our nature, which will be discussed more fully in what follows.

So while God has created us to strive for the good, we do sometimes will evil. Now the question arises as to whether when we choose evil, are we choosing it as evil or are we simply mistaken about what is good? That is, when we will evil, is this due to mere ignorance or do we knowingly do what is wrong? Unfortunately, Conway is not clear on this point. Her language would suggest that we at least sometimes knowingly will evil. She writes that we resist good through a ‘willful transgression’ and that we ‘abuse’ our free will when we choose evil. However, she also claims that when a creature fails to perform the best action that creature has acted from ‘pure will’. According to Conway, to act in this manner is to act ‘without any true and solid reason or the guidance of wisdom’ and to be ‘unable to give any explanation for their actions other than their own pure will’ (*P* III.1, 15). The earlier passages suggest that Conway holds that we knowingly and wilfully resist what is good, but the latter passages suggest a sort of culpable ignorance on the creature’s part that is compatible with a more intellectualist view. If Conway were to hold an intellectualist view of the will – one where the will is determined by the truth and goodness, or the apparent truth and goodness of the object – then every sin would be due to ignorance or error. We simply mistake what is less good for what is more good. This seems to be her view. As we will see, when creatures act, their choices are always based on the goodness of the object. However, we win in choosing to love what is less good rather than what is better.

Conway's account of creaturely free will bears some similarity to both Descartes' account and Henry More's account.¹¹ For instance, Descartes holds that although human beings are capable of indifference of will—being inclined or disinclined equally in all directions—this is 'the lowest grade of freedom'.¹² Likewise, Conway sees this sort of freedom as diminished. Descartes writes,

In order to be free, there is no need for me to be inclined both ways; on the contrary, the more I incline in one direction – either because I clearly understand that reasons of truth and goodness point that way, or because of a divinely produced disposition of my inmost thoughts – the freer my choice. Neither divine grace nor natural knowledge ever diminishes freedom; on the contrary, they increase and strengthen it. But the indifference I feel when there is no reason pushing me in one direction rather than another is the lowest grade of freedom; it is evidence not of any perfection of freedom, but rather of a defect in knowledge or a kind of negation.¹³

In this passage, Descartes claims that indifference of will results primarily from a created being's lack of knowledge. For, if all of our knowledge were clear and distinct, our

¹¹ Conway and Henry More studied Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy* as part of her philosophical education. In her own work, Conway makes numerous arguments against Descartes's dualism. For her arguments against Descartes, see Jennifer McRobert, 'Anne Conway's Vitalism and Her Critique of Descartes', *International Philosophical Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (2000): 21-35. Although Conway opposed his dualism, she compliments Descartes' physics (*P* 9.2, 64) and seems to accept his general methodology (*P* 6.4, 30).

¹² Of course there is great scholarly debate over Descartes' account of human freedom of the will. For an interpretation differing from the one here, see Martina Reuter, 'Freedom of the Will as a Basis of Equality: Descartes, Princess Elisabeth and Poullain de la Barre', in *Freedom and the Construction of Europe*, edited by Quentin Skinner and Martin van Gelderen, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), ii, pp. 65-83.

¹³ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), ii, p. 40.

reason would always lead us to the best choice. It is a defect in creatures that they are not always led by reasons of truth and goodness.

Another one of Conway's influences, Henry More, held that having a will that is determined by the good is a perfection rather than a defect. Speaking of those who reject every sort of determination, More writes, 'For they judge a Thing voluntarily done, to be of far different Merit from what happens by Compulsion: Which yet (I confess) sounds to me, as if God, who is Good, should be the less Adorable, because he cannot act Naught'.¹⁴ Here, More argues that since God is constrained to do good, there can be nothing wrong with such constraint. More, like Conway, claims that voluntariness or spontaneity is sufficient for attributing free will to God. In addition, More claims that there is another sort of free will, *Liberum Arbitrium*, which involves the ability to act or not act, as we please without having determining reasons for our actions, which he attributes to human agents. More writes,

But now as to *Liberum Arbitrium*, or Freedom of the Will; what we call by that Name is only that sort of Spontaneity or Voluntariness in us; which is so free and undetermined, that it is in our Power, to Will or Act this way or the other way, as we please. This (I say) is properly Free-Will; and it supposeth a free election or Choice in our selves.¹⁵

¹⁴ Henry More, *Enchiridion Ethicum*, translated by Edward Southwell, facs. ed. (New York: The Facsimile Text Society, 1930), p. 173. This edition is a facsimile reprint of the English translation of More's 1690 work, *An Account of Virtue* (London: Benjamin Tooke, 1690).

¹⁵ More, *Enchiridion Ethicum*, p. 178.

In many ways Conway's account of free will is very much in keeping with her contemporaries. Like Descartes, she believes that human indifference of will is an imperfection, and like More, she takes God to be the paradigm of freedom and the moral exemplar. However, her account differs from theirs insofar as it is the basis for dramatic changes in the moral, physical, and metaphysical nature of beings, which we will see in what follows.

Conway's account raises at least three interesting problems. First, why would God create beings at all if in doing so he must bring evil into the world? Second, according to Conway, it is in the nature of created beings to improve, so how is it possible that they are capable of choosing evil? Finally, how is a morally perfect being justified in distributing substantial moral, physical, and metaphysical punishments and rewards for actions that seem to be largely the result of creatures' God-given powers?

2.3 Why Indifference of Will?

Let us begin with the first difficulty: why would God create any creatures at all if he must make them capable of evil? As noted above, part of the answer to this question is that in order to create, God must make something that is different in nature from himself. She writes,

And since he is not able to multiply himself because that would be the same as creating many Gods, which would be a contradiction, it necessarily follows that he gave being to creatures from time everlasting ... for otherwise the goodness

communicated by God, which is his essential attribute, would indeed be finite and could be numbered in terms of years. (*P II.4, 13*)

So, if God is going to create something, it follows that what he creates will be mutable and subject to corruption. However, it seems that God might simply have chosen not to create anything at all if this were his only option. Here, Conway claims that whether to create or not is not a choice for God. God creates from the necessity of his own nature. She describes God as ‘the infinite fountain and ocean of goodness, charity, and bounty’, and asks, ‘In what way is it possible for that fountain not to flow perpetually and to send forth living waters?’ (*P II.4, 13*). According to Conway, it is in the nature of God to continually communicate goodness, to do as much as he can, to be a creator. God is always active and never changes. Since he is perfectly good and cannot increase in his goodness, his goodness is communicated into creation. Conway writes, ‘For the goodness of God is communicated and multiplied by its own nature, since in himself he lacks nothing nor can anything be added to him because of his absolute fullness and his remarkable and mighty abundance’ (*P II.4, 13*).

Conway’s account of God’s communication of goodness answers the questions: ‘why does God create?’ and ‘how does God create?’ Her response is that a perfectly good being must do as much good as he can, so he communicates his goodness in every way possible. However, the claim that God makes mutable, and thus possibly evil, creatures out of the necessity of communicating his goodness might strike one as odd. Conway is aware of this tension and addresses it head on. In a passage strikingly similar to one that Leibniz will later

write in his *Theodicy*, Conway claims that although God provides the ability or power for a creature to choose evil, he is in no way the author of evil.¹⁶ She writes,

Indeed, no one thinks that because I say that the motions of every creature come from God that he is or could therefore be the author or cause of sin, for although the power to move comes from God, yet sin in no way comes from God but from the creature which has abused this power and directed it to something other than it should. Thus sin is *ataxia*, or a disorderly direction of motion or the power of moving from its appropriate place or state to another. If for example, a ship is moved by wind but is steered by a helmsman so that it goes from this or that place, then the helmsman is neither the author nor the cause of the wind; but the wind blowing, he makes either a good or bad use of it. When he guides the ship to its destination, he is praised, but when he grounds it on the shoals and suffers shipwreck, then he is blamed and deemed worthy of punishment. (*P VIII.2*, 58)

Here, Conway compares the God-given power or capacity that creatures have of choice making (our power to will and move) to the wind that enables the helmsman's ship to move.

¹⁶ G. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*, edited by Austin Farrer, translated by E.M. Huggard (Chicago: Open Court, 1990). Compare the following passage from Part I, Section 30 of Leibniz's *Theodicy*: 'Let us now compare the force which the current exercises on boats, and communicates to them, with the action of God, who produces and conserves whatever is positive in creatures, and gives them perfection, being and force: let us compare, I say, the inertia of matter with the natural imperfection of creatures, and the slowness of the laden boat with the defects to be found in the qualities and the action of the creature; and we shall find that there is nothing so just as this comparison. The current is the cause of the boat's movement, but not of its retardation; God is the cause of perfection in the nature and the actions of the creature, but the limitation of the receptivity of the creature is the cause of the defects there are in its action' (p. 141).

The power is good and necessary for motion, and a good helmsman will make excellent use of it (she will choose the good). However, error or sin also can come from the misuse of this power. But just as the responsibility for running the ship ashore falls on the helmsman rather than the wind, when creatures misuse their will, they alone are responsible. God's contribution to our choice is positive, and allows us to move towards greater goodness. It is the creature's abuse of this power that brings about evil.

Leibniz makes a similar analogy between the current of a river that carries boats downstream and the slow and often irregular motion of the boats. He claims that the current is swift and flows in an orderly direction; however, the various shapes and loads of the boats cause retardation of their motion. According to Leibniz, this retardation of motion is caused by a natural inertia or privation in matter. Like Conway, Leibniz claims that God is the cause of motion, but it is the natural limitation of creation that is responsible for any resulting disorderly movement.¹⁷ Conway's and Leibniz's explanations are similar in that they both claim that God provides created beings with the power to move, and thus with the power to err and sin. Of course, for Leibniz, matter, which is naturally inert, causes the limitation and sin, but since Conway holds that there is no such thing as inert matter—all things being spiritual and alive—she claims that the limitation and privation lies in abuses of the power to will or choose God has granted us.

¹⁷ Even on an idealist reading of Leibniz, God's concurrence in sin amounts to God's providing all the positive aspects of the action while the creature supplies what is negative. Thus, the creature is responsible for the sinfulness of the action.

Of course, problems remain. For although we have seen why God might create beings with the ability to choose evil or sin, it is still unclear why beings, which are created with a natural striving for the good, would choose to do so. We turn to this issue next.

2.4 Similarity, Love, and Choice

Given that God implanted in his creation a desire for the good, how are we capable of choosing evil? Conway has explained that creatures have the power to choose either good or evil, but we might still require an explanation as to why it is that beings endowed with a love or desire of the good should actually will or choose to do evil. Here, we must investigate the causes of desire, or motivation, according to Conway.

The basis for all love or desire, according to Conway, is similarity. We desire and love that which we believe is similar to ourselves either in kind, in cause, or in thought. She writes, ‘Now, the basis of all love or desire, which brings one thing to another, is that they are one nature and substance, or that they are like each other or of one mind, or that one has its being from another’ (*P* VII.3, 46). Here, Conway claims that there are three reasons why one might love or desire something.¹⁸ The first is that we recognize that we are of the same nature and substance as another. Conway provides examples of things of the same species loving each other. Of course, once we understand the true nature of created substance (by reading

¹⁸ Jacqueline Broad rightly notes that Conway seems to have a fourth basis for love or desire, which is ‘that one recognizes the goodness in the other’. See Jacqueline Broad, *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 75. However, Conway seems to think that we call something good only because we recognize its similarity to us in one of the three aforementioned ways.

Conway's philosophy), we see that all created beings are part of one and the same spiritual substance. This is the basis for love between all of God's creatures. The second reason is that we believe something to be like us in its ideas, beliefs, attitudes, and reasoning. Finally, we love and desire those who create or generate us and are likewise loved by those who are generated by us. Thus, Conway provides examples of parents and children. However, this is also the reason for love of God and Christ.

Conway acknowledges that some have thought that the basis of desire and love is goodness. And she agrees that goodness is a cause of love. She writes,

I answer that one must concede that goodness is the great, indeed, the greatest cause of love and its proper object. This goodness is not, however, a reason distinct from those already mentioned but included in them. For the reason why we call something good is because it really or apparently pleases us on account of its similarity to us, or ours to it. (*P VII.3, 47*)

She concludes, 'Therefore, the reason why we call, or think, something good is that it does us good and we share in its goodness' (*P VII.3, 47*). When we desire, love, or act, we do so because we believe that the object is good. We see this goodness as similar to ourselves and love and desire it for this reason. When a creature desires and loves something, she changes herself. Conway writes, 'For whatever receives something is nourished by it and thus becomes part of it' (*P VII.4, 54-5*). And again, 'Thus, whatever someone loves—whether it is

a human being, an animal, a tree, silver, gold—is united with him, and his spirit goes out to it’ (*P* VII.4; 53).

So, in order to understand how creatures choose evil over good, we must understand that we are able to see things as similar to ourselves in different respects. We must also note that since all species are of one spiritual substance, there is a real sense in which all creatures are similar to one another in their nature. Although it is in our nature to strive for the good—to become as much like God as we are capable—it is also the case that our natural bond with other creatures can cause us to love and desire what is beneath us and that which will lead us away from God. We naturally see as similar, and thus pleasing, all other beings of our species, those who seem to have similar views as our own, and those who brought us up. However, amongst these beings are likely some who lead less than virtuous lives, and insofar as we see those beings as similar to ourselves, we are capable of loving and desiring them. It is this will or choice of loving things beneath us instead of loving the true good, God, which is sin.

This choice to love and desire has real consequences for not only our moral lives, but also our physical existence, according to Conway. For she holds that interaction between individuals occurs, as Carol White notes, ‘by a process analogous to emanation or radiation’.¹⁹ According to Conway, whenever we see, hear, taste, smell, or touch, we are exchanging spirits with others. We produce subtle spirits in our own bodies, which in turn are

¹⁹ Carol Wayne White, *The Legacy of Anne Conway (1631-1679): Reverberations from a Mystical Naturalism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2008), p. 58.

perceived as colours, sounds, odours, and so on, and are taken in by other created beings.

When we receive these sorts of images from others, they are stored in our body. These spirits literally become part of us and can influence our future desires, thoughts, and will. Conway claims that we are united to things by loving them. When we perceive other things as good, or love them, we take part of them into ourselves. However, when we will to love something more bestial or corporeal than our present state, we become more bestial and corporeal ourselves. She writes,

Also, if a man is united and joined with something, then he becomes one with that thing. He who unites himself to God is one with him in spirit, and he who unites himself with a prostitute is one in flesh with her. Shouldn't someone who is united to a beast become one with that beast for the same reason and similarly in every other case? (*P* VI.8 37)

The choice to love something low on the scale of being rather than God is a sin – it causes us to literally become less than we are.

Finally, we come to the last question, what are the moral and metaphysical consequences of our indifferent will? Is it the case that God punishes us for this abuse, even though our nature seems to be the cause of our error and sin? We turn to these issues in the next section.

2.5 The Metaphysical and the Moral

2.5.1 Sin and Punishment: How Moral Change Causes Metaphysical Change

First, we must consider Conway's account of how our moral choices result in metaphysical change. According to Conway, every individual has one principal spirit, which is constituted by a bundle of spirits, that is their dominant spirit and which constitutes that individual. This principal spirit determines the external shape of the individual by causing the formation of the darker grosser spirits (body) connected to it to reflect its image. Conway claims the principal spirit organizes the other spirits that constitute the individual and that perform the various functions of the creature, such as sight, touch, hearing, and so on, through the production of lighter spirits. The principal spirit of an individual remains the same throughout the individual's existence. This is the core of personal identity. Conway's view of personal identity is a type of haecceitism—one where a bundle of spirits designates a particular individual. Wherever and however this bundle of spirits exists, the individual exists.

The body reflects the image of the principal spirit. Conway likens it to holding an image in a mirror. She writes, 'Moreover, spirit is light or the eye looking at its own proper image, and the body is the darkness which receives this image. And when the spirit beholds it, it is as if someone sees himself in a mirror. ... since the reflection of an image requires a certain opacity, which we call body' (*P* VI.11, 38). A more brutish principal spirit will form the external form of a brute, and a more angelic spirit will have a more angelic exterior.²⁰

²⁰ Conway holds that all created beings are embodied to some extent, even angels, although they may not be visibly embodied. For more on Conway's views concerning the body, see Marcy P. Lascano, 'Anne Conway: Bodies in the Spiritual World', *Philosophy Compass* 8, no. 4 (2013): 327-36.

Thus, these principal spirits are responsible for the conversion from one type of being to another through a vital motion that is given to them by God. Since this bundle of spirits does not dissolve, although it can become more light or dark, it is what receives the fitting punishments and rewards.

Conway maintains that God's justice is primarily manifested in the world by his creation's ability to change. Conway holds the 'great chain of being' view. That is, she believes that within the world, there is a scale of being from the lowest to the highest. She does not specify all the points along the scale, but it seems she held the fairly traditional view that has God at the top, followed by Christ, then creation. Within creation there are angels, humans, then animals, plants, with perhaps the lowest being stones and minerals, all these things again sorted with respect to their relative virtue. The top of the chain has the most light and subtle spirits while the bottom has more dark and gross creatures. However, within created beings, these various subspecies are of one substance. According to Conway, every creature is convertible into different kinds of things. She writes,

Consequently, after some period of time all these things can change into very different kinds of things, and this happens through the same process and order of that divine operation which God gave to all things as law or justice. For in his wisdom he has decided to reward every creature according to its works. (*P V.7, 27*)

Conway argues that since all creation is one substance and the nature of that substance is mutability, the individuals in that substance may take the form of any subspecies

within the substance. The individuals take on different forms as appropriate in accordance with their true inner natures (as expressed by their free will and choice). A horse, by conducting itself well in accordance with the nature of its kind, might, through gradual improvements, some day take on the form of a human being. The changes can be an improvement, as in the case of a horse becoming a man, or can be a case of degeneration, as when a man becomes a horse or devil. She writes,

This justice appears as much in the ascent of creatures as in their descent, that is, when they change for the better or worse. When they become better, this justice bestows a reward and a prize for their good deeds. When they become worse, the same justice punishes them with fitting penalties according to the nature and degree of their transgression. The same justice imposes a law for all creatures and inscribes it in their very natures. Whatever creature breaks this law is punished accordingly. But any creature who observes this law receives the reward of becoming better. (*P* VI.7, 35)

When God's law is obeyed, individuals are rewarded by ascending the great chain of being—becoming more light and subtle. When the law is transgressed, individuals are punished by descending the chain—becoming darker and grosser. The mechanism of change is rooted in the nature of created substance, and what prompts these changes is the free will of individuals.

2.5.2 The Limits of Evil and Universal Salvation

God originally creates an infinite number of light and subtle spirits that are drawn to each other by love and sympathy, but who, through their capacity to move freely and sin, change into different types of beings and become darker and grosser. As was noted earlier, it is not possible that a creature eternally choose to sin or become completely dark. Conway writes,

Consequently, it is the nature of a creature, unless it degenerates, always to become more and more like the creator. But because there is no being which is in every way contrary to God (surely nothing exists which is infinitely and immutably bad, as God is infinitely and immutably good, and there is nothing which is infinitely dark as God is infinitely light, nor is anything infinitely a body having no spirit, as God is infinitely spirit having no body), it is therefore clear that no creature can become more and more body to infinity, although it can become more and more spirit to infinity. (*P* VII.1, 42)

Since God is infinitely good and light and all creation takes part in at least some of his perfection, it is metaphysically impossible that anything be infinitely bad or infinitely dark. For in order for something to be infinitely bad, evil, or dark, it would have to be completely devoid of all perfection or being, which Conway thinks would be a mere nothing or non-entity. She writes, ‘For this reason, nothing can be bad to infinity, although it can become better and better to infinity. Thus, in the very nature of things there are limits to evil, but none to goodness’ (*P* VII.1, 42). Conway derives her view of universal salvation from the fact that God’s nature ensures that no creature is irredeemable. She writes, ‘And because it is not

possible to proceed towards evil to infinity since there is no example of infinite evil, every creature must necessarily turn again towards good or fall into eternal silence, which is contrary to nature' (*P VII.1, 42*). But how do creatures that have turned towards evil, turn back towards goodness and light? This is where her views of punishment and pain play a role.

Every sin is punished and this punishment serves to bring the creature back to the good. Conway writes, 'every degree of evil or sin has its own punishment, pain, and chastisement, which will return that creature to the pristine state of goodness in which it was created and from which it can never fall again because, through its great punishment, it has acquired a greater perfection and strength' (*P VII.1, 42*). When creatures are punished by descending the ontological chain of being they become more embodied and more dark, and this motion causes pain and suffering for the creature. But the pain and suffering is restorative, not punitive. Conway notes,

All pain and torment stimulates the life or spirit existing in everything that suffers. As we see from constant experience and as reason teaches us, this must necessarily happen because through pain and suffering whatever grossness or crassness is contracted by the spirit or body is diminished; and so the spirit imprisoned in such grossness or crassness is set free and becomes more spiritual and, consequently, more active and effective though pain. (*P VII.1, 43*)

So, although the natural consequence for sin is pain and chastisement, the motions that are caused by this pain and suffering break down the hardness of our bodies and allow for our spirit to become more refined. Conway holds that there are two kinds of hardness in bodies. There is the literal hardness of visible embodiment and there is a hardness that is not perceptible to the senses, but which is a real hardening of the interior, spiritual being (*P* VII.1, 43-4). Although she is not specific on this point, it seems likely that Conway's view is that pain and suffering breaks down the internal hardness that a creature has acquired and prepares her for a rise up the ontological ladder in her next life.

Conway holds that the punishments we receive for sin are only finite and restorative, rather than eternal and punitive. She denies eternal damnation and believes that all creatures are eventually restored to a state even better than that in which they were first created. She argues that eternal punishment and hell are inconsistent with the nature of an all-good and loving God.²¹

[A]ll degrees and kinds of sin have their appropriate punishments, and all these punishments tend toward the good of creatures, so that the grace of God will prevail over judgment and judgment turn into victory for the salvation and restoration of creatures. Since the grace of God stretches over all his work, why do we think that God is more severe and more rigorous a punisher of his creatures than he truly is?

²¹ Conway, like the Cambridge Platonists, was very interested in the works of Origen, a defender of universal salvation. Conway was the patron of George Rust, who wrote *A Letter of Resolution Concerning Origen* (1661) defending Origen's views. For more on the influence of Origen on Conway, see Sarah Hutton, *Anne Conway: A Woman Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 60 and 69-71.

This obscures and darkens the glory of God's attributes in an astonishing way and does not foster love for God and admiration of his goodness and justice in the hearts of men as it should, but does precisely the opposite. (*P* VI.8, 37)

Conway is aware that her views about eternal punishment are non-standard within the Christian tradition. However, she has reasons for holding them. The first is that she believes that it is inconsistent with the nature of perfect justice to punish a finite sin with an eternal punishment. Creatures are, by their very nature, mutable and limited. This is how they are differentiated from God. It is improper to punish them for their nature. So, creatures are only punished for willing incorrectly. Since no creature can will incorrectly eternally, no creature is punished infinitely or eternally. Thus, every sin will be punished, but all these punishments will lead to the betterment of the creature punished.

Her belief that God's goodness is his essential attribute leads her to hold the thesis of universal salvation. Eventually, all spirits will attain 'perfect tranquillity' (*P* V.7, 27). She writes, 'Hence one can infer that all God's creatures, which have previously fallen and degenerated from their original goodness, must be changed and restored after a certain time to a condition which is not simply as good as that in which they were created, but better' (*P* VII.1, 42).

In addition, her views on the nature of punishment partly explain the appearance of injustice in the world. For Conway claims that we do not realize when we sin that we will be punished appropriately, and that this punishment is only meted out after the dissolution of the

body.²² Thus, her view is consistent with the fact that evil persons do not seem to be fitly punished in this life nor do the good seem to be fitly rewarded.

Finally, Conway's denial of eternal damnation serves a pragmatic purpose. She believes that propounding the view of eternal damnation only leads people to fear God and not to worship him and desire to emulate him.

But why must creatures go through this long and tortuous route to ultimate salvation? Conway claims that all creatures 'in their primitive and original state were a certain species of human being designated according to their virtues' (*P VI.4*, 31). Since creatures can change, they will change. According to Conway, this is all part of God's plan for creation. She writes,

Thus the lowest becomes the highest and the highest (as it was in its original nature) the lowest, according to the pattern and order which the divine wisdom has arranged so that one change follows another in a fixed sequence. Hence A must first be changed into B before it can change into C, and must be changed into C before it can change into D, etc. (*P IX.5*, 65).

The reason why creatures must go through these changes, according to Conway, is that 'God gave all things an order of divine law or justice and decided to reward every creature according to its works' (*P V.7*, 21). However, once a creature rises to a certain level of

²² Conway has the means for explaining why it is that individuals do not recall their previous incarnations. She holds that the body is the repository of thoughts and knowledge for the creature. When the body is dissolved at death, the individual no longer has direct access to these dark spirits. Thus, one cannot have direct knowledge or thoughts about their previous existence.

goodness, it seems that Conway believes it will become practically incapable of sin (although it is still metaphysically possible that it sin). She writes, ‘Consequently, from that indifference of will which it once had for good or evil, it rises until it only wishes to be good and is incapable of wishing any evil’ (*P* VII.1, 42). ‘Hence one can infer that all God’s creatures, which have previously fallen and degenerated from their original goodness’ will be restored (*P* VII.1, 42).

2.6 Conclusion

I have provided Conway’s account of metaphysical free will for both God and creatures, and explained why her account of the will differs between them. I have also shown that sin results from a created individual’s abuse of their indifference of will. This misuse is largely determined by the nature of the creature in that created beings are naturally inclined to love and desire those things that appear similar to them, but sometimes love things improper to their natures. Creatures move away from God when they desire and love things beneath their nature. These wilful movements are punished by God, but only for the betterment of the individual. Eventually, all creatures turn toward goodness and become better than their original state. Thus, though initially God’s conferring of indifference of will on created beings might seem an injustice, Conway argues that every being is ultimately benefitted by God’s punishments and that every being will receive ultimate reward.