

“Conscience requires free will.” Discuss.

In this essay I will look at different understandings of the conscience and of free will, considering whether the concept of conscience also requires the concept of free will.

Firstly, does a religious concept of conscience require free will? Newman believed that conscience is the voice of God and has absolute authority. This concept of conscience is compatible with free will – God instructs us as to the right course of action, and we can freely choose whether to follow God’s voice or not. However, would the idea of conscience make sense without free will? If God knew that we had no control over our actions, that we could not choose one course of action or another, then why would he tell us which was the right thing to do? Theological determinism suggests that God’s omniscience means he knows what we will choose. Calvin even believes that God is in complete control – he predestines some to be saved and others to be damned. Calvin believes we are totally depraved, and could not choose the right course of our own accord, so God chooses who will be saved and forces salvation on them through irresistible grace. Calvin’s view of conscience seems similar to Newman’s – it is entirely from God, not a human capacity, so conscience merely informs us of God’s will. This view of conscience does not require freedom, but merely presents conscience as an awareness of God’s will, and a guilty conscience is a reminder of our depravity and inability to follow God’s will. Newman did not agree with Calvin here, and he would have argued that God gave us the conscience to direct our activity, not merely to shame us after we fail to live up to God’s standards. Newman’s views are more consistent with other Christian beliefs. If Calvin’s hard determinism were correct, and we were unable to choose whether to do right or wrong, there would be little point in the conscience or in Scriptures or the Church. The idea of reaching out to non-believers makes no sense if God has already ordained which will be saved and which will burn in judgment.

Butler develops Newman’s ideas about the conscience, saying it is like a natural guide. We have selfish instincts, but are also inclined to help others. The conscience guides us as to when to act selfishly, and when to be altruistic. This guide seems to require free will – it makes little sense to give someone a guide if they are going to follow a set path anyway. Butler’s conscience is incompatible with a hard determinist position that claims we have no free will. However, it may fit better with a soft determinist view. Soft determinists still believe that we are completely determined – this idea seems compatible with God being all-powerful and omniscient. An almighty God could hardly be surprised by the actions of individual humans, Calvin would argue. However, soft determinists draw a distinction between those things that are externally determined, such as by laws of physics and coercion, and those that are internally determined, by my formed personality. Conscience could then be an internal guide, given by God, that fits with a soft-determinist account of free will as actions resulting from internal causes. It doesn’t matter that the internal causes have causal explanations that ultimately go back to external causes (even God), as what the soft determinist means by ‘free will’ is merely that an action is determined by the agent – even if the agent’s nature is determined by other things.

Aquinas’ view of the conscience is less compatible with any determinist position. For Aquinas, conscience is a God-given ability to reason. Whilst our human nature is determined by God, and we recognise this through synderesis, an intuitive grasp of our God-given purpose, it is our rationality that guides us as to how to fulfil our nature. We must do good and avoid evil, but reason shows us how to do this. Reason allows us to be free from our animal nature and make rational choices. These choices can in no way be determined, otherwise they are in some way irrational. Aquinas would be more compatible with a libertarian position, saying our reason presents us with the right course of action, and we can freely choose whether or not to follow it. In fact, his ideas about an erring conscience confirm this view. For Aquinas, it is possible for us to err vincibly (when we are at fault) or invincibly (when we are not at fault). For example, if I steal a sandwich to feed a homeless man, I should have known that this was wrong. However, if I reach into my bag and give him a sandwich which, by accident, belongs to my friend and was not mine to give, I am not at fault. In both cases, I acted wrongly, giving away food that was not mine, but in the latter case I am not at fault because I couldn’t have known. It is clear from this distinction that I must be free to reflect on the Primary Precepts such as ‘to live in an ordered society’, and when I choose to steal to help others, I have made a bad choice because I have not acted rationally. A libertarian view, where I have an uncaused moral self, fits best with Aquinas’ view of the conscience, suggesting that conscience requires free will.

Psychologists would disagree with Aquinas’ assertion that we have a fixed nature or purpose. Freud saw the world as chaotic and meaningless. Any morality is a human construct. For Freud, the conscience results merely from society’s disapproval – a guilty conscience is a subconscious echo of a telling off from our parents or teachers. Likewise, the instinct

to do good or be kind or helpful results from occasions when such behaviour is rewarded. This view of conscience doesn't require free will at all – in fact, it fits with a hard determinist world view that suggests we are not free. Skinner was a hard determinist who believed that human behaviour could be controlled – his ideas about operant conditioning seem to echo Freud's talk of the 'ego-ideal' as the love side of early relationships with parents. Skinner's ideas are on a firmer scientific footing than Freud's – this is because Skinner carried out specific experiments that showed that you could control the behaviour of animals through operant conditioning. This takes away the need for a God-given conscience, and seeks to explain human behaviour without either free will or conscience. Skinner would agree with Locke and Spinoza that we believe we are free because we are aware of our actions but unaware of the causes of our actions.

This paints a very negative view of the conscience. It doesn't fit well with all those who have given their lives to fight for their beliefs – people like Martin Luther King and Mother Theresa who dedicated their lives to doing the right thing because their conscience told them God's will. It also goes against our everyday opinions that some actions are good and others bad, that we ought to do one thing and not the other. Kant held morality in the highest esteem – 'Nothing fills me with greater awe than the starry sky above and the moral law within'. He said that morality requires freedom. For Kant, the conscience is the good will – the will that chose to do one's duty, and this is incompatible with a determinist position (ought implies can – if we ought to do a thing, we must be able to). However, Kant's idea of an objective moral standard that we can all grasp through reason doesn't seem to fit the observation that every society has different moral laws. Cultural Relativism seems to conflict with any idea of conscience as an awareness of God's law or universal absolutes.

Modern psychologists may have the best explanation of conscience, borne out of years of observation of human behaviour. It appears that the conscience develops over time. At first, Piaget suggests, we have a heteronomous morality, where we basically do the right thing for fear of the consequences. From the age of about 10 or 11, we have an autonomous morality that is aware of the expectations of others and is based on more independent decision making skills. This view of conscience, that conscience is learnt, is not as bleak as Freud's, and is based on more solid evidence and repeatable experiments. However, it is not really a libertarian view, as our conscience is still determined by things outside our control. Piaget's theory suggests that conscience is compatible with free will in the soft-determinist sense, that by 11 our internal personality is formed to the point where it can make its own decisions independently of the world around us, so the causes of our actions are internal.

A secular libertarian would look to Fromm or Kohlberg for support. Fromm's initial view of the conscience was similar to Freud's, an authoritarian conscience that resulted from society or parents. However, Fromm came to think that we could move past this, and through a process of reflection could influence the development of our conscience. This humanistic conscience is like the uncaused moral self of the libertarian. Such a conscience does require free will, as without freedom we would merely have an authoritarian conscience. Kohlberg's stages of moral development are an adaptation of Piaget's, and he investigated a far greater range of subjects, including many substantially older than Piaget's. At the lower stages, we are just trying to avoid punishment and looking at what we can gain from an action. As we work up the stages, we become more aware of social norms, and want people to have a high opinion of us. The top stages involve an awareness of social contracts, and ultimately universal ethical principles (similar to Kant's categorical imperative). The pre-conventional levels of moral development do not require free will at all – we are acting like animals, aware of good and bad consequences and merely repeating behaviour that has good consequences and avoiding behaviour with bad consequences. The higher levels require an understanding of social norms and expectations that only make sense when combined with the concept of choice or free will. The conventional levels might fit with a soft-determinist view of free will. However, the post-conventional levels, to do with social contracts and universal moral principles, suggest a different sort of freedom. Many studies suggest that a lot of people never make it to these stages, and this fits Peter Vardy's contention that we often fail to act freely, and that truly free acts might be quite rare. These thinkers hold out the hope that if we can truly break free from the genetic, social and other factors that influence our decisions, we can form our own, uncaused, responses that are truly free.

In conclusion, some explanations of the conscience do not require free will at all, but these are pictures of a conscience that we would not want to follow. Some religious ideas, of conscience as the voice of God, require freedom but seem incompatible with the variety of moral codes in society, and seem subjective. However, some religious and secular views of the conscience as an ability to grasp universal ideals are compatible with a libertarian position, and require some sort of uncaused moral self to truly make sense, one that can think beyond the individual's situation. The belief in the conscience as an awareness of principles we should follow requires a belief in the freedom to choose whether to follow them or not.