

Who Is in Control?

Consciousness

Chapter Summary: Consciousness is our most familiar experience, but because it is private to each of us, it is difficult to understand. What is clear, however, is that much of our behavior is not under our direct conscious control or monitoring. In this chapter, we discuss the implications of unconscious and conscious thought, the relationship of both to behavior, and what they indicate about humans as responsible limited agents. We will explore how thought and behavior shaped by deep desires that come with seeking meaning, are influenced by conscious and unconscious thought.

We take consciousness for granted because it is so available, so easy to use, so elegant in its daily disappearing and reappearing acts, and yet, when we think of it, scientists and nonscientists alike, we do puzzle.

Antonio R. Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind*

Good morning! Your alarm goes off at 7:00 a.m. You wake with a start from a dream in which you were arguing with a monkey that has stolen your new shoes. You yawn, rub your eyes, and somehow get to the bathroom to take a shower. By the end of the shower, you finally start to feel awake.

When a morning starts that way, where's the line between your being awake and being asleep? For instance, if you are asleep, how do you "hear" the alarm? And how "awake" are you when you wake? Some days you are

very aware of where you are and what day it is, but on other days you may be totally confused and disoriented, at least momentarily. If you feel less awake before your shower, what changed so that you feel more awake afterward? You may say you feel more “alert,” but what does that mean? Alertness might be thought of as a readiness to respond. Yet being “ready to respond” is relative—we can be somewhat more or somewhat less mentally prepared to act.

Alertness falls under the umbrella of the larger subject of this chapter, *consciousness*, which is a person’s subjective, firsthand experience of reality and one’s own thoughts. Although each individual’s consciousness is a personal experience, not directly known by anyone else, reports of consciousness are accompanied by observable bodily responses to events, like smiling in response to a joke. In addition, if you were to record a person’s brain activity, there would be characteristic patterns of neural responses that correspond with her report of being conscious. Observable bodily movements can occur without consciousness, however, and can happen without being consciously noticed by the person. In fact, many behaviors occur without conscious awareness, such as staring too long at someone who is attractive or saying “um” when thinking of what to say next (which is probably more likely when staring at someone attractive!).

Consciousness = Wakefulness + Awareness

Private experiences of our surroundings and our own thoughts, including our thoughts about our experiences, are deeply human. Some psychologists say that this characteristic of consciousness “is essential to what it means to be human.”² Simple wakefulness (being alert) is seen in animals that show sleep and wake cycles, and animals awaken from sleep if there is a loud noise or “alarm.” What may be unique to human consciousness is the awareness of our own subjective reality—what we each feel and experience from our own point of view. This dimension of consciousness is more than just knowing that something is happening—demonstrating wakefulness by being able to respond—it’s a self-awareness of our own thoughts and perceptions.

These two dimensions—wakefulness and awareness—are the basic properties of consciousness and have been shown to be completely separable from each other. Our own experiences, like differences in how we feel from one day to another when waking up in the morning, show us that wakefulness and

awareness fluctuate. Neuropsychological research confirms these variations.² If both wakefulness and awareness are very low, a person would experience a coma; if both are high, the experience is conscious wakefulness. In addition, one can be high and the other low, such that they vary independently of each other. During a vivid dream, awareness is high, but wakefulness is low. Conversely, in a vegetative state, a person can appear to be awake (with eyes open), but that person lacks awareness.

If awareness or general alertness can vary so much, how can embodied persons with limited agency responsibly enact their beliefs (Themes 3 and 4)? That is, if Christians believe that they must follow the Bible in their living, how can they do that if they are not fully alert and aware in every situation they find themselves? People sleep; both psychology and the Bible are clear on this. Are self-awareness and awareness of God necessary or sufficient for faithful living, or is more needed? In the remainder of this chapter, we will explore variations in consciousness and their implications for understanding a biblical view of humans.

Limited Consciousness, Limited Agency

From a Christian perspective, consciousness, including self-consciousness, is not enough for people to live out what they believe in all times and all places. People fail to follow through on God’s commands because humans are sinful (Theme 2). People sin even when aware of their own sinfulness and desiring to avoid sin. As the apostle Paul wrote in Romans: “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.”³ In this passage, although Paul really wants to stop his own sinning, he still continues to sin. Trying really hard did not get the job done because humans don’t just make errors; people are in a state of sin. Nevertheless, Paul certainly gives directives to the churches he writes to,⁴ with the obvious expectation that people have sufficient awareness to check what they are doing against what they ought to be doing and make changes as needed.

Psychology does not set out to address humanity’s state of sin. Psychology does, however, provide insight into understanding how self-awareness allows

2. Laureys, “Eyes Open, Brain Shut,” 32–37, further describes the dimensions of wakefulness and awareness, showing how the relative strength of each of these contributes to various states of consciousness.

3. Rom. 7:15.

4. Among the passages where Paul gives instruction in Christian living are Eph. 4–5 and Col. 3:4.

us to check whether our behavior follows our beliefs. To use consciousness in this way, it seems that we would want to maintain high levels of awareness throughout our waking hours (and hope we don't do or think about anything when unconscious during sleep!). Unconscious behaviors had best be avoided altogether because they are not consciously supervised. Psychological science and our own personal experiences, however, show that we cannot constantly check ourselves and that much of our behavior is unconscious.

Unrelenting, full awareness simply does not happen. Wakefulness and awareness vary through the day. For some, mornings tend to be rather groggy, while for others, evenings are times of drowsiness.⁵ Another way that awareness fluctuates is when our minds wander as we daydream.⁶ Variations in wakefulness in a well-rested person influence thinking and responding, but the effects of sleep deprivation's influence on processes as varied as decision making, emotionality, and driving—and that the impacts are greater than most people suspect. Sleep-deprived people "nod off" during all sorts of tasks, including driving, and do so without even knowing it. As one researcher has said, sleepiness results in "inability to focus, delayed and poor decision making, indifference, lack of motivation," and general lack of self-monitoring.⁷ As sleep deprivation grows, people tend to rely more on habitual, automatic responses such as stereotypes and intuitive decision making (see chap. 9 for both good and bad consequences of such decisions). Our physical state requires that we sleep. When we are sleepy (and certainly when we are asleep), we have a more difficult time exerting our will. Our already limited human agency is even more limited.

Unconsciousness

If behavior is unconsciously managed at least part of the time, are people then unable to direct their behaviors, leaving them without responsibility during those times? In contrast to Theme 4, are people then non-responsible

5. Kerkhoff, "Inter-Individual Differences," 83–112, provides a thorough review of how people differ from each other in terms of circadian rhythms through the day, also known as "morningness" versus "eveningness."

6. Mind wandering has become an area of research interest. Mason et al., "Wandering Minds," 393–95, provide information on the neural basis of our mental excursions while awake.

7. Dement, *Promise of Sleep*, 233. In his book, he extensively outlines the various and rather dangerous consequences of inadequate sleep. Harrison and Horne, "Impact of Sleep Deprivation," 236–49, reviewed the research on sleep deprivation's many effects on decision making; Durmer and Dinges, "Neurocognitive Consequences of Sleep Deprivation," 117–29, indicate a wide variety of cognitive deficits related to sleep deprivation, including higher accident rates, poorer learning, and slower response times.

non-agents? It's important to note that when today's psychologists are talking about the unconscious, they typically don't mean the sort of unconscious Sigmund Freud had in mind, with its underlying desires (drives or energies) seeking to be satisfied when unconscious (i.e., dreams) or "released" during consciousness in indirect ways. Freud's particular view of the unconscious was overly complicated and has not stood up well to scientific scrutiny, but it did generate a great deal of interest in the nature of the unconscious mind.⁸ More important to our discussion, Freud viewed human behavior as determined by unconscious processes, leaving people without responsibility for their actions. Freud's depiction of humans was both unscientific and contrary to a biblical view of human nature in this case (see chap. 14 for a more extensive critique).

When psychologists today discuss unconscious processes, they primarily point to aspects of mental processing that are not directly experienced yet contribute to each person's thoughts, decisions, perceptions, emotions, and behavior. These include processes that cannot be brought to consciousness, no matter how much we try, as well as processes that are currently outside of awareness but that we could bring to awareness (like paying attention to the fact that we're saying "um" in conversation). Many basic processes of perception (how we detect light or configure parts of an image to determine that it is a face) and memory (how a memory is formed through altering the activity of neurons in the brain) simply cannot be consciously accessed. This aspect of the unconscious—the *cognitive unconscious*—works in ways that are more efficient and manageable than if such processes were consciously processed. Therefore, very common, "simple" processes like dividing sounds into words or perceiving the color blue are prevented from reaching consciousness due to how the brain processes information. In this understanding of unconscious processes, decisions and feelings occur without us being aware of all of the steps and thoughts involved because doing so is more efficient, not because such thoughts are repressed, as Freud suggested. As psychologist Timothy Wilson writes, "The mind is a well-designed system that is able to accomplish a great deal in parallel, by analyzing and thinking about the world outside of awareness while consciously thinking about something else."⁹ Processes that don't require conscious monitoring are processed unconsciously, while those that need more careful monitoring occur consciously.

8. The scientific failings of Freud's theorizing about the unconscious are pointed out in most introductory psychology books. Scientific theories "must have specific implications for observable events in the natural world," as Stanovich, *How to Think Straight about Psychology*, 12, writes. Freud's theory doesn't make clear predictions—it merely explains human behavior after behavior occurs. Science is interested in prediction.

9. Wilson, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 8–9.

Limitations of Consciousness

The capacity of consciousness is severely limited. At most, we can consciously think about only a few items at once, and often times only one (see chap. 6 on the limitations of attention), so much of our thinking appears to be unconscious.

Consider the amount of conscious relative to unconscious thought taking place in the following situation. You're walking down a street where you live, and a person sitting on the sidewalk yells, "Help!" What should you do? You need to quickly evaluate lots of information and form answers to many questions regarding the other person (Is the person serious? Is it someone I know?), the situation (Is anyone else around? Is there danger?), and yourself (Am I equipped to help? Do I feel like helping?). Most of those dimensions are evaluated unconsciously—without awareness. People simply don't consciously ask each of these questions one at a time before deciding whether to keep on walking or to stop and try to give assistance. The conscious thought, "That person needs help, I need to stop," may occur, but such a conclusion follows from and occurs alongside a lot of unconscious processing that strongly informed it (using System 1 processes¹⁰ as described in chap. 9, on thinking). Even your response of asking, "How can I help you?" includes unconscious processes that result in the tone of voice you use, ensuring you use both a noun and a verb, and even your choice of which particular words you use. In the case of speech, "each and every conscious process is accompanied by (or is a residual of) unconscious processing."¹¹

Free Will and Unconscious Thought

What does this depiction of conscious relative to unconscious processing have to say about responsible limited agency (Theme 4)? Psychologists have a variety of answers, in part because they disagree about how conscious and unconscious processing work together. A particularly disputed issue is how one type of processing might control or influence the other.

No Freedom

Some, such as psychologist John Bargh, view conscious processing as pointless. He states that the "feeling of free will is very real, just as real for those scientists who argue against its actual existence as for everyone else, but this strong feeling is an illusion."¹² This perspective reasons that although the

experience of awareness is caused by the brain, this sense of awareness impacts neither the brain nor behavior. That is, being "aware" doesn't change what people actually do, so a sense of awareness does not matter, and certainly doesn't make us more responsible.¹³

Those who take this point of view argue from research indicating that human behavior is profoundly influenced by factors outside of conscious awareness, such as making automatic evaluations of situations and others in less time than it would take to be consciously aware of them.¹⁴ This research, showing that attitudes and actions are automatically activated (primed) by objects and actions around us, can be interpreted as showing that free will doesn't really exist—people are simply responding to their environment.¹⁵

Those arguing against human free will also point to research on perceptions of self-control when people make a simple, voluntary movement. In some well-known experiments by Benjamin Libet and colleagues, research participants were told to move their index finger whenever they wanted, while the timing of three events was measured: (1) when brain activity related to making a finger movement occurs, (2) when the person was aware of making a conscious decision to move, and (3) when the actual finger movement occurred.¹⁶ Using electrical sensors placed on a participant's scalp for measurement of brain activity, such experiments found that electrical activity related to planning a move began about a half second before the finger began to move, as measured by sensors measuring muscle movement in fingers. That makes sense—the brain first made a plan, then carried it out. But what about the feeling of having decided to move? To measure this, participants watched a dot move around the face of a clock to mark the moment at which the action was consciously willed. Such studies have shown that the conscious decision to act was experienced only about one-fifth of a second before the actual movement. The

13. This is the notion that consciousness is an epiphenomenon.

14. Fazio et al., "Automatic Activation of Attitudes," 229–38, showed that attitudes can be automatically activated by simply viewing objects about which a person has a strong attitude. That attitude can then act to influence evaluation of a next object to be evaluated—that is, evaluations of objects about which one has an attitude can prime responses to other objects. If research participants saw a word they had previously judged to be negative (e.g., "crime"), then were to decide if an adjective was negative (e.g., "disgusting"), they were faster at making their decision than if they saw a word that they judged positive (e.g., "gift"). Fazio et al. state that such activation appeared in their study to be "both spontaneous and inescapable" (p. 236).

15. Freud also believed that humans have no free will, but his reasoning was different. According to Freud, humans lacked free will because they were at the mercy of unconscious desires that could not be willfully controlled.

16. Libet has conducted several experiments on this topic, including Libet et al., "Time of Conscious Intention to Act," 623–42, and Libet, "Unconscious Cerebral Initiative," 529–66.

10. Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 20.

11. Dijksterhuis and Aarts, "Goals, Attention and (Un)Consciousness," 471.

12. Bargh, "Free Will Is Un-Natural," 148.

13. Libet has conducted several experiments on this topic, including Libet et al., "Time of Conscious Intention to Act," 623–42, and Libet, "Unconscious Cerebral Initiative," 529–66.

brain's planning of the action, however, began before conscious awareness of deciding to move—so the brain was active *before* even consciously thinking of the action!¹⁷

Daily experiences echo such effects. Many times, our thoughts about an action occur only *after* an action has been completed. If you greet someone and a friend asks you, “Why did you say ‘hi’ to her?” you are likely to give a reason such as, “Because she lives next door to me.” But prior to your greeting, did you actually have the conscious thoughts, “She lives next door to me. I will say hello”? You probably just said hello. For a great proportion of our behaviors, we act *without* experiencing any conscious awareness of governing our behavior; in which cases we can't claim that a behavior was caused by conscious thought: the thought never happened! Many behaviors are not the result of carefully examined and well-reasoned thought. How people act is often not intentional in the sense of behavior following a complete conscious thought. This fact may lead us to greater humility about the wisdom of our own behavior and greater grace in responding to the behavior of others.

All of these findings and examples, taken together, lead some psychologists to conclude that even when we have the sense of consciousness being in charge of our brains and bodies, that may not be what is happening. Some take this as strong evidence that humans have no agency; free choice is an illusion.

At this point in this chapter (maybe even earlier), your conscious mind may be yelling something like, “What do these people mean I don't choose? Of course I choose what I want to do! I have free will!” If you have been talking with a friend and notice the time, you may think to yourself, “Oops, I'm supposed to be at work, I have to go.” In that case, it seems very sensible to conclude that your decision-making processes, at least some of which were conscious, led to your behavior. As humans, we have a natural tendency to see cause-and-effect relationships. That's part of our basic predisposition to seek meaning (Theme 5). This, along with our very real experience of having thoughts, helps lead us to believe that our thoughts cause our own action.

The Role of Free Will

Scripture shows that people do have *real* choice, however limited that agency may be (as we outlined earlier). But is there any place in psychological science for free will? Some psychologists, including Roy Baumeister, say that those arguing free will is nonexistent based on their studies of consciousness need to reevaluate what the research shows. Critiquing the research on priming and sequencing brain and movement events, Baumeister says that this work focuses on “slicing behavior into milliseconds,” but doing so may “conceal

the important role of conscious choice, which is mainly seen at the macro level.”¹⁸ Baumeister argues that consciousness is limited, so it would be used sparingly, only where it's necessary. Conscious planning and oversight are needed for big picture behaviors (macro level), rather than being wasted on monitoring endless, tiny details (happening over tiny fractions of a second). Free will may have more to do with deciding to walk to a particular destination than supervising the placement and action of each footstep on the trip.¹⁹ Although we can make ourselves aware of each footstep (or in the case of Libet's experiments, each finger movement), Baumeister argues that free will is more involved in deciding *whether* to walk somewhere (or in the case of Libet's experiments, *whether* to follow the experiment's directions) than in planning each movement. In addition, as awareness varies from less to more, a simple, highly practiced behavior like moving a finger may require little awareness to be carried out.

It is important to note that by using our limited free will and setting the course of our own behavior, we also limit future possibilities. Over our lives, these changes in course (e.g., I will play basketball rather than participating in theater) yield consequences that impact the directions of life (e.g., more of my friends are fellow basketball players than folks in theater). Those directions, though later limited and seemingly without alternatives, were the consequence of conscious choices made earlier. The patterns of our lives reflect our choices; behavior that resulted from exercising our agency has long-term consequences.

Arguing in favor of free will, Baumeister points out two advantages of human agency. First, agency allows humans to have self-control, or willpower, which allows for long-term goals to be accomplished by resisting immediate desires (e.g., remaining free by not stealing money). In addition, humans have the ability for rational choice to decide, among other things, what those long-term goals might be and how to achieve them. Baumeister goes on to assert that self-control and rational choice are evolutionarily advantageous—humans who have these forms of controlling behavior are better able to function in human situations of relationships and rules than those who do not.¹⁹ Interestingly, Bargh, who argues against free will, also looks to evolutionary theory to support his approach, stating that “consciously expressed preferences” are based on evolutionarily based preferences (modified by culture and learning), but fundamentally based in our evolved tendencies.²⁰ Thus, people simply act

17. Baumeister, “Free Will in Scientific Psychology,” 15.

18. Ibid. He follows the logic of Gollwitzer, “Implementation Intentions,” 494, in arguing

to separate deciding from initiating.

19. Baumeister, *Cultural Animal*, 45–46.

20. Bargh, “Free Will Is Un-Natural,” 136.

in evolved ways to respond to the environment, and our experiences of free will are meaningless.

In both cases, evidence is evaluated through interpretive lenses, also known as worldviews, which make up a fundamental orientation regarding human nature. As we have seen, psychologists are able to study experiences of conscious will—when and if people say they feel like they are causing their own actions. Psychologists cannot conclude, however, that thought (which is internal and unseen) *causes* action. Remember that in psychological science, all causes must be physical to count as scientifically valid. As Daniel Wegner, a leading researcher on consciousness and willpower, writes, “The experience of will is based on interpreting one’s thought as causing one’s action.”²¹ The experience of having caused our own behavior varies with how we interpret our situation and is not necessarily due to thought actually causing action. Those on both sides of the free-will debate acknowledge that the existence of free will is ultimately a question for philosophy and theology more than psychology.²² However, psychological science informs this debate by gathering data that helps us better understand conditions in which humans are more likely to feel or act in ways that correspond with showing agency, as well as situations in which people are less likely to do so.

Consciousness and Christianity

The portrait of human behavior painted by psychology is one in which behavior largely is managed unconsciously, so that if there is any free will, it’s quite limited. If that’s the case, is human behavior primarily ruled by unconscious impulses and automatic responses to the environment (except for occasional instances in which a person’s will can be exerted)? If free will is so limited by unconscious processing, then for all practical purposes we’re not independent agents. When a person is able to control very little that she does, how can she be responsible for much of what she does? Human responsibility, however, is part of the Bible’s depiction of humans. Can these seemingly incongruent ideas be reconciled?

As humans with limited agency, perhaps what’s most important in living out what one believes is to consciously evaluate our deepest commitments.

Many of these deep commitments, however, are held outside of our awareness. After all, consciousness is limited. The Bible actually discusses how to deal with such thoughts and behavior, and assumes that people are responsible to change them.

Let’s explore an example of this by following the logic and behavior outlined by the apostle Paul’s writing to Timothy, his coworker in Christ. Paul encourages Timothy to “continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”²³ Timothy grew up in a home in which he was taught Scripture and its meaning. This was the foundation of Timothy’s life, and would have influenced Timothy’s behavior and thoughts in ways he would not have even been aware of. Nevertheless, Paul implies that other influences can be at work (e.g., conflicting desires, the evil of the world, etc.) that may derail Timothy from the track of his conviction to serve God. Paul tells Timothy that humans need to bring their deepest convictions to the forefront of thought, and studying the Bible can help accomplish that. Paul writes, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”²⁴ Even familiar passages—ones that Timothy would have memorized—can act to change behavior and attitude (teaching, rebuking, correcting). In addition, it can train one in “righteousness,” which is living in such a way that it pleases God. As Paul writes elsewhere, through studying God’s commands, “we become conscious of our sin.”²⁵ Again, Paul is implying that people can be unaware of what they do. When Christians look at what they aspire toward (living righteously), they are confronted with those deficiencies. It is important to note that the Bible says it is the Holy Spirit who ultimately allows believers to understand and believe who God is and to desire to live for God.²⁶

Controlling Desire

We are relational persons (Theme 1); wanting to be in relationship is a commitment or desire held by all people. As humans, however, relational desires to be with God, others, and creation are all distorted by sin, so we look for

21. Wegner, “Who Is the Controller?,” 32.

22. For example, Baumeister, “Free Will in Scientific Psychology,” 15, and Wegner, “Who Is the Controller?,” 19–23, arguing the two sides regarding free will, recognize that science cannot answer the free will question. Recent books by psychologists, such as Gazzaniga’s *Who’s in Charge?*, continue to weigh in on the question of whether humans have free will.

23. 2 Tim. 3:14–15.

24. 2 Tim. 3:16–17.

25. Rom. 3:20b.

26. 1 Cor. 2:10–16.

other ways to fill that longing. That longing, Christians believe, is fulfilled in God. Christian philosopher James K. A. Smith, in his book *Desiring the Kingdom*, asserts that humans are fundamentally driven by what they love or desire, whether they are aware of it or not. Smith says that in addition to reasoned thoughts (relatively easily brought to conscious awareness) and a set of beliefs (of which we are likely less aware), unconscious processing is pervasive. As he writes, “We don’t go around all day *thinking* about how to get to the classroom or *thinking* about how to brush our teeth or *perceiving* our friends. Most of the day, we are simply involved in the world.”²⁷

Smith says that we act out *all* of our loves—our desires—through our actions. Being embodied, we enact our desires and meaning making in physical ways. We’re not just talking about sex here. When we go to a classroom, brush our teeth, or meet with friends—all practices or habits—we are aiming our desires toward some larger end. In these examples, the behaviors may aim toward greater social acceptance in one way or another, whether by education, hygiene, or companionship. Practiced behaviors eventually become unconscious, automatic behaviors that can then take on a life of their own.²⁸ These desired outcomes, or *goals*, can be consciously set or automatically activated by our surroundings. For instance, most students in a course have conscious goals such as (at minimum) earning a passing grade. Students act in ways to meet that goal, and with practice that goal can operate unconsciously.²⁹ People act as a student without even planning to do so.³⁰ Sometimes, that goal gets altered—seeing a person we are attracted to can do that, as social and relationship goals might become active. Multiple goals may be active, and the student might now be advocating the formation of a study group (student plus social goals), or the student may forget about the course altogether and go straight to asking that person out on a date. Here we see action, yet it may not include full, conscious awareness of why one is doing the action. Studying may no longer be a priority in the action, although the student may still think or say it is the basis of the action.

Does this now return us to the conclusion that humans are without free will, with behavior driven by unconscious goals rather than by will? The Bible and many in psychology again answer no. In psychology, lots of research on automatic behavior has focused on how to reign in unconscious thoughts,

using self-control to suppress or stop “bad” behavior.³¹ Many may have the impression that this fits right with what Christianity advocates: a big list of don’ts. And the Bible certainly tells us there are things to not do: “For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.”³² But focus on the second part of this verse: a “do” follows the “don’t.” Scripture advocates that behavior can be changed by redirection of the heart—one’s inner desires.

■ God and Desire

Notice here that the Bible is *not* saying that on believers’ own power alone they can “live self-controlled, upright and godly lives.” God’s grace, through the Holy Spirit, enables us to desire God. Look at this call from Jesus, speaking to his closest followers, his disciples: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.”³³ It’s easy to focus on “deny” and “lose”—giving up desires—and then sin should be gone. However, just giving up desires won’t work. If, as Smith asserts, we are fundamentally lovers³⁴—at our core, creatures that do things according to our desires—we can’t just give up desires! Christ says to give up, but then “take up their cross daily and follow me.” Desire continues to exist; the Christian life isn’t one of suppression but of redirection to fulfillment in Christ. As theologian St. Augustine so eloquently described the human relationship to God, “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”³⁵ As meaning seekers, we desire a deity, and this desire for God comes from God. Yet in human sinfulness, desires are easily directed toward other things, including ourselves. Through the Holy Spirit’s work, however, desires can be positively directed toward God.

Perhaps a uniquely human characteristic is our desire to be a better person. This comes about from *self-consciousness*, or the ability of a person to draw attention to one’s self as a thing that can be examined. Research suggests that

³¹ See, for example, Muraven, Baumeister, and Tice, “Self-Regulation through Practice,” 446–57.

³² Titus 2:11–12.

³³ Luke 9:23–24.

³⁴ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 51.

³⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 77, uses this quotation from Dijksterhuis and Aarts, “Goals, Attention and (Un)Consciousness,” 467–90, have a thorough discussion of the relationship between unconscious processing and goals. Perhaps always sitting quietly in the same spot in a classroom.

you were able to recognize yourself in the mirror after about eighteen months of age, but let's focus on the human "tendency to evaluate yourself and notice your shortcomings."³⁶ Self-consciousness allows us to think about what we are like and what we can be. This ability varies between people and with levels of alertness. In addition, substances like alcohol, tobacco, heroin, and other psychoactive drugs can alter how we respond, and can lead to long-term consequences or addictions where persons crave and use substances despite their negative consequences. Drugs can alter brain chemistry, making it difficult for users to discontinue use of the substance. One may have some self-conscious awareness that one's drug use is harmful but little ability to stop that use. In fact, alcohol actually reduces self-awareness,³⁷ and this is likely an effect of other drugs as well. Thinking back to the case of Ethan from the introduction, his adult alcohol use problems are likely exacerbated by alterations in brain functioning and reduced self-consciousness. These changes impact his ability to exercise responsibly his limited agency. He has reduced ability to modify his desires.

Psychological research on automatic impulses and desires has tended to focus on suppression of these tendencies. Such research has shown that using self-control to suppress desire is very taxing and often unsuccessful. Evidence does suggest that the more one practices self-control, the greater the ability to be self-controlled becomes.³⁸ Willpower, to some degree, begets more willpower. Yet in all cases, once willpower has been exerted, people tend to be more susceptible to self-control failures afterward (working hard, then partying hard).

■ Redirecting Desire

Recently, psychologists have begun exploring how behavior might be altered by influencing desires. Desires need to be replaced with new desires, and conscious decisions can aid in redirecting them (not just suppressing them).³⁹ Desires operate largely unconsciously, but unconscious behavior can be redirected in humans and animals.

³⁷ Hull, "Self-Awareness Model," 586–600.

³⁸ For example, research by Muraven, Baumeister, and Tice, "Self-Regulation through Practice," 446–57, and by Muraven and Baumeister, "Self-Regulation," 247–59, suggests that self-control is strengthened with practice.

³⁹ This is what recent research on desires by Hofman and Van Dellen, "Desire," 318–20, shows: desires need direction. Conscious decisions can aid in redirecting desires, and that is a way of showing self-control.

toward other goals. As psychologist Peter Gollwitzer has emphasized, it is important to direct behavior at the outset—deciding what is important to do, and then, as Baumeister has emphasized, many of the small details (the automatic behaviors) occur without intention.⁴⁰ The Bible confirms that redirected actions change desires: "Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires."⁴¹

When calling his disciples, Jesus bids them to "follow me."⁴² If the disciples didn't know it immediately, "follow me" meant not just a change of lifestyle but a total change in what was important in life—where their desires would be directed. Jesus told Simon Peter and Andrew, the fishermen, that they would "fish for people."⁴³ Life's primary fulfillments would no longer come by filling nets and selling fish but by bringing people to a saving love of Christ.

■ Applications: "Reporting for Duty"

Christ calls his followers to line up their will with God's will. When Christ taught his disciples to pray, in what we now call the Lord's Prayer, "your kingdom come, your will be done,"⁴⁴ he was telling his followers to set their desires on God's desires, to let their desires be taken up into God's desires. As theologian N. T. Wright has said, when Christians are praying this, "We are praying, as Jesus was praying and acting, for the redemption of the world; for the radical defeat and uprooting of evil; and for heaven and earth to be married at last, for God to be all in all. And if we pray this way, we must of course be prepared to live this way."⁴⁵

How can conscious thought influence desires toward God? We the authors have a friend named Gord who begins each day by leaning up against a wall while stretching before exercise and prays, "Good morning, Father; it's your servant Gord again, reporting for duty." Gord tells us that "then I remind him that he will have to put up with all of my weaknesses and idiosyncrasies but that I really do want to serve him." He continues in prayer and reading Scripture during his exercise routine. Gord sets the tone for each day—reaffirming and reminding himself of the big decision to follow Christ that puts in line both

⁴⁰ Gollwitzer, "Implementation Intentions," 493–503; Baumeister, "Free Will in Scientific Psychology," 14–19.

⁴¹ Rom. 8:5.

⁴² For example, Matt. 4:19, when calling Simon Peter and Andrew.

⁴³ Matt. 4:19.

⁴⁴ The Lord's Prayer is recorded in Matt. 6 and Luke 11.

⁴⁵ Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, 31.

his conscious and unconscious, unmonitored decisions for the day. Gord in effect is saying, “I want to be aware of you, God—use me.” It’s setting a tone and practice of spiritual awareness by giving over his will to God and acting on it to the extent one can.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways do you feel burdened by your conscious awareness?
2. Think of experiences in which you explained your behavior after you had done something. Was your explanation true to what you were thinking going into the behavior? How would you know?
3. What percentage of your own behavior do you think results from unconscious processing? What evidence do you have for the remainder of your behavior being under conscious control?
4. Is sin offensive to God if a person did not make a conscious decision to commit the sin? That is, can something that is just a habit be a sin? Explain.
5. Psychologist Carl Rogers (and also Nathaniel Branden, who was instrumental in highlighting the importance of self-esteem) emphasized that humans needed to bring to consciousness all of their behavior and act out of their natural core desires. How might that be problematic, both scientifically and from a Christian perspective?
6. In the last anecdote of the chapter regarding Gord, we emphasize that his statement and stance are an initial decision that can help put into play unconscious behaviors that may follow. Think of an example of how turning on a movie or opening an internet connection (or some other behavior with a distinct beginning) also sets in motion a set of automatic behaviors and responses.

6

Making Sense of Your Surroundings

Sensation, Perception, and Attention

Chapter Summary: Our abilities to sense, perceive, and pay attention are astounding, allowing us to navigate our environment and interact with each other. These abilities are so common to us and require so little of our conscious awareness that they go largely unnoticed. Our embodied sensation limits our ability to take in everything in our environment and also partially determines what we notice and find meaningful. In fact, meaning making appears to be what perception and attention are all about. This combination of great ability and marked limitation shapes the contours of our limited agency and has significant implications for relationality. This chapter explores how the limited but meaningful nature of our perceptual system ultimately serves our ability to maintain relationship with God, the world, and one another.

The King said, “I haven’t sent the two Messengers, either. They’re both gone to the town. Just look along the road, and tell me if you can see either of them.” “I see nobody on the road,” said Alice. “I only wish I had such eyes,” the King remarked in a fretful tone. “To be able to see Nobody! And at that distance, too!”

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

The question is not what you look at, but what you see.

Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, August 5, 1851