

CONSCIENCE

The word 'conscience'

- The English distinguishes between consciousness and conscience, making 'conscience' stand for the moral department and leaving "consciousness" for the universal field of objects about which we become aware.
- In the two words *Bewusstsein* and *Gewissen* the Germans have made a distinction answering to our "consciousness" and "conscience". Other modern languages frequently don't make the distinction.
- The ancients mostly neglected such a distinction. The Greeks often used *phronesis* where we should use "conscience", but the two terms are far from coincident. They also used *suneidesis*, which occurs repeatedly both in the Old and the New Testament.
- The Hebrews had no word that immediately translates as 'conscience', though in Scripture, the heart often stands for conscience.
- An old English word for conscience is 'inwit'. It is used, for example, by Chaucer.

Secular notions of conscience

The Greek philosopher Socrates noticed that his guardian spirit or 'daemon' gave negative guidance, telling him what not to do rather than what to do.

Freud coined the term 'superego' to mean the immaturely developed conscience resulting from parental influence in early years. The demands of parents and others on whom the child depends become internalized as an authority over (super) the conscious self (ego). The superego may tend to be rigid, nonrational and oppressive, depending on the child's early experiences of authority.

As well as the effect of upbringing on conscience, one could also bring in the rules of society and the way they are internalized by the individual. There are some who would say conscience is no more than the product of such things as upbringing and social conventions on the mind.

Catholic understanding

The Catholic view of conscience is based, like all Catholic teaching, on *tradition* and *scripture* interpreted by the teaching office of the Church (*Magisterium*).

The Scholastic period is the age when theology and philosophy, reinvigorated by the recovery of Aristotle's thought, flourished as academic disciplines in the medieval monasteries and centres of learning. Thomas Aquinas was perhaps the greatest product of this age. Aquinas taught that conscience involved the application of the mind to moral questions (this he called practical reason); speculative reason was the application of the

mind to questions of logic. Just as the mind had a basic orientation to recognise *true* and *false* in logic, it was also attuned to *good* and *bad* in moral questions.

Aquinas used the word *synderesis* for the apprehension of basic moral principles by the mind. Every time one makes a moral choice one must reason through from first principles to a specific judgement. Aquinas used the word *conscientia* to mean the final act of judgement.

Modern Catholic moral theology draws much from the Scholastic period, and from Aquinas in particular. However, the Church now uses conscience to include

- awareness of basic precepts (*synderesis*),
- the process of applying them,
- the final judgement.

The Church, along with others, has always taught that *one should follow one's conscience*. But the age-old dilemma presents itself: one should follow one's conscience; one's conscience can make mistakes. This is resolved by another insight: *the education of one's conscience is a lifelong endeavour*. What helps a person to do this?

- The counsel of good people around us;
- the Word of God (in scripture and tradition);
- the teaching authority (Magisterium) given to the Church by Christ for the good of her members.

In this light, conscience might be thought of as the meeting point between the subjective and the objective, where one makes objective moral truths one's own (cf. '*Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey ...*' *Gaudium et Spes*).

A famous passage from a Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* (Joy and Hope) is often used to *misrepresent* the Church's position. People conclude that conscience=Voice of God. What they should conclude is that conscience is one's *perception* of that Voice in the core of one's being.

According to the Church, conscience can be blinded through habitual sin. If one follows an *erroneous* conscience one only incurs blame to the extent that the ignorance was one's own fault (*vincible* ignorance). Where there is no possibility of overcoming the ignorance and error by one's efforts, one is in *invincible* ignorance. Following an erroneous conscience because of invincible ignorance incurs no fault (formal sin); nonetheless the 'material' wrong remains.

Cardinal Newman noted the tendency to view conscience as an absolute guide without reference to any authority other than itself: 'my conscience told me to do X ...' can be a gloss for 'I wanted to do X ...'. In other words, a person can mistake 'the right of self will' (Newman's phrase) as 'conscience' in the Christian sense. The secular notion of conscience tends to see it as one's secret core and sanctuary where *one is alone with oneself*, rather than alone with God (cf. *Gaudium et Spes* quote).

Cardinal Newman spoke of the conscience as being as the first representative (*'aboriginal vicar'*) of Christ for the Christian (cf. quote).

Protestant ideas

- The Anglican theologian and bishop of the eighteenth century Joseph Butler saw conscience as having two aspects: an *intellectual* aspect whereby the conscience reflects on the good or bad in characters, actions, intentions, and so on; an *authoritative* aspect whereby the conscience approves or disapproves of choices. Conscience, for Butler, always has this right of judgement.
- There are points of agreement between Butler's notion of conscience and the Catholic understanding: for example, he recognises that conscience is part of what it means to be human (see quote), akin to the natural law understanding of the Catholic Church. This is underpinned by St. Paul's words to the Christians of Rome (see quote). In this light, all human beings, by virtue of conscience, can be called to account for their choices, to be acquitted or condemned.
- Calvin, the French-Swiss reformer of the sixteenth century, believed that the vast majority of human beings were predestined for damnation. His brand of teaching persists - especially in fundamentalist Protestant groups who argue that man is utterly depraved without the grace Christ won for us. They would reject the natural law position of the Catholic Church, and presumably devalue the operation of the moral conscience in the person who is not one of the 'elect'.

Insights from scripture

The OT describes experiences of conscience without using the word itself (the word occurs sporadically in the Wisdom books). Instead it uses 'heart' or 'reins' or other such images.

St. Paul picks up the word *suneidesis* (not to be confused with *synderesis*) from popular Greek philosophy to mean conscience (cf. quote from Romans). He normally uses the word to get across the Christian's interior sense of being confronted with the demands and judgements of God.

What difference does becoming a Christian and receiving the Holy Spirit make to the natural faculty of conscience? According to St. Paul, it means:

- allowing the mind of Christ to be formed in the person (cf. 1 Cor 2:16), and a special access to God's grace and will (cf. 2 Cor 1:12),
- the freedom of a good conscience from the judgement of others, but respect for weaker consciences (cf. 1 Cor 10:29),
- doing everything in good faith because '*every act done in bad faith is a sin*' (Rom 14:23).

Scholarly quotes/views

'Church documents never use the word 'conscience' to mean superego or awareness of social convention. The Church is interested in conscience only in the third sense, as the ability to know moral truth.'

Professor Grisez, a Catholic moral theologian

'... there could be no stability or certainty in what results from the first principles unless the first principles were solidly established ...'

Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae* (arguing that a person is naturally 'tuned in' to basic moral principles from which specific judgements may be developed. In this way, a person's judgement of conscience is based on *objective* moral norms. He called this apprehension of first principles *synderesis*.)

Aquinas believed the conscience to be *'the mind of man making moral judgements'*.

'Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths.' Gaudium et Spes, Vatican II

'There is a superior principle of reflection or conscience in everyone, which distinguishes between internal principles ... as well as our external actions; which passes judgement ... (pronouncing) some actions to be in themselves just, right, good; others to be in themselves evil, wrong, unjust.' Joseph Butler, Sermons

'Had it (conscience) strength as it has right, had it power as it has manifest authority, it would absolutely govern the world.' Joseph Butler, Sermons II, III: Upon the Natural Supremacy of Conscience

'... They (pagans) can point to the substance of the Law engraved on their hearts - they can call a witness, that is, their own conscience - they have accusation and defence, that is, their own inner mental dialogue'

Romans 2:15-16

'But if someone says to you, 'This food was offered in sacrifice', then you should not eat it, for the sake of his scruples; his scruples, you see, not your own. Why should my freedom depend on someone else's conscience?'

1 Corinthians 10:28-29

'Conscience ... is a messenger of him, who, both in nature and grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules us by his representatives. Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ.'

John Henry Newman, *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*

General points/questions that might be made/raised

Conscience is part and parcel of being human.

Every sane human being can relate to phrases like: *in good conscience*; *with a bad conscience*; *with an uneasy conscience*.

All major traditions agree that one should always follow one's conscience.

Is conscience principally about reason or emotion or both?

Do/should personal feelings or preferences influence the judgement of conscience?

When I make a decision in conscience, do I refer to any criteria or standards outside myself (subjective versus objective)?

How do we explain the fact that two people will do the same wrong deed and yet they may each experience a different degree of guilt?

How does belief in God affect one's understanding of conscience?

Could 'conscience' be used as an argument for God's existence?

Is conscience a 'separate faculty' or simply the mind applying itself to a moral judgement?

Some might wonder why we should educate our conscience. Ignorance is bliss. The more we educate conscience, the less comfortable we'll feel with our moral choices.

Others would say that an educated conscience can help us do away with irrational guilt feelings. Anyway, we educate our consciences for the good of ourselves *and of others*.

A conscience may be over-sensitive - but is this the same as saying 'over - educated'?

Would a Christian have a similar understanding of conscience to that of a non-Christian?

Can a morally good person be defined as 'one who always obeys his or her conscience'?

'Nothing we do is truly moral until we are free to do otherwise.' Discuss.

'Conscience is no more than the product of early training and social conditioning.' Discuss.

Can telling a lie sometimes be morally preferable to telling the truth?

Should a Christian always trust his or her conscience?

To what extent does Kant contribute to an understanding of moral responsibility?

Discuss the problems raised by the idea that conscience is 'the voice of God'.