

Describing and defining conscience



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According to the definition in Colliers encyclopaedia, conscience is the human beings direct or deliberate conviction of right or wrong in resistance to the humans strong impulses and desires, conscience is the force that makes one recognise what one ought to do and bids one to do it. The problem of conscience involves two questions; what is its nature and its origin, and what is its authority? The earliest accounts of conscience, in theological tradition, explain it as the voice of God in the soul directing one to do right.

1. Modern ethics, without the appeal to supernatural principles, has developed to main theories of conscience, intuition and empiricism.

Intuitionism agrees with the theological doctrine that there exists a direct and imperative certainty in right and wrong but describes this so called “moral sense” as a plain fact of moral nature.

Various versions of intuitions have regarded the moral sense as analogous to the familiar five senses or as emotional, or as the verdict of moral reason. Empiricism rejects the claim of intuitionism as contradicted by the evidence of past experience and claims that there is no such conviction of right and wrong and that conscience is simply the cumulative inference from past experience directing future conduct. Its authority is not universal or absolute, but varies with circumstances and is ever subject to revision.

2. Conscience is a key term in Christian ethics foundation of traditional moral theology and a word familiar in popular speech.

3. Perhaps the single most important statement on conscience in the documents of Vatican 2, occurs in the Pastoral Constitution of the Church.

4. Man has in his heart a law written by God, to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged.

Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of man. There he alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths.

In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbour.

Infidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals and from social relationships. { Vat. 2. 1966 n. pp 213-214}

1. Colliers Encyclopaedia, Vol. 7, p.

2. Colliers Encyclopaedia, Vol. 7. p.

3. MacQuarrie John, Dictionary of Christian Ethics.

4. Bier W. C. SJ. Conscience-its freedom and limitations.

Traditionally, conscience has not been thought of by Christians as a special faculty, or as an intuitive voice of God with in us but simply as " the mind of man making moral judgements."

This is how Thomas Aquinas classically defined it. Strictly speaking conscience decides in a particular case what is to be done or avoided in the
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light of a grasp of general moral principles which St. Thomas called Synderesis. Conscience then, is a judgment of the practical reason at work on matters of right and wrong.

5. Indeed, in the popular mind, conscience is often taken to be a synonym for morality itself. The rights of conscience, the duty of conscience, what conscience demands or permits, all these are taken to be summaries of the human moral enterprise.

In point of fact, the matter is considerably more complicated than such colloquialisms might lead us to believe. The popular understanding is at least correct in as much as it insists on a central role for the reality of conscience. Thus, having considered what it means to be a human agent and a human person, and having sought to analyse the moral implications of that agency and that personhood, we now turn to a particular aspect of that human person, conscience.

6. In living the Christian life we have help from the past and the present. We do not face the burden of decision naked and bereft. Never the less, the decision finally must be ours. This might be a daunting prospect if the basis of the Christian life has not justification or acceptance by faith in Christ and not as a reward for a high record of conscientious moral achievement.

Indeed it is precisely because the Christian is secure in the knowledge of what Christ has already done for him, that he is able to face unafraid the inevitable uncertainties of moral decisions in the present.

To bring to bear moral judgments on the facts of a particular case is known as casuistry. There is much in its history which is dubious and has been questioned, but there is no escape from every Christian being a casuist once he admits that acting from the right motive is not enough; he must also seek to do what is right in the particular circumstances. The training of motive is a matter of ascetic theology; the training of the moral judgment in the situation in the education of conscience.

It follows of course that conscience belongs to man as man. It is not the peculiar possession of the Christian. Having the capacity to recognise moral distinctions and apply them in particular cases is part of what we mean by a man. The actual deliverances of conscience and profoundly { and rightly } influenced by time and circumstance, though they are not determined by them. The Christian has the advantage of a more adequate understanding of human life and destiny and deeper grasp of goodness, through Jesus Christ they can be found elsewhere. He has also greater resources through the Holy Spirit in the Church on which to draw. He therefore, has the greater responsibilities. All men, whether they believe it or not, are responsible before God for acting according to their conscience and for educating their conscience according to their circumstances and possibilities.

Conclusion:

Conscience is what bears witness to and illuminates; conscience judges that inner awareness, evaluating it in an impartial and unbiased way {cf. also Rom. 9: 1; 2 Cor 1: 12f }.

Conscience is not an exterior judge; it is an aspect of the self and thus understood, it can have several different qualities of its own.

5. MacQuarrie, John Dictionary of Christian Ethics, P. 66

6. O'Connell, Timothy Principles for a Catholic Morality, P 83

It can be a bad conscience, denying the realities of the moral life. Conscience can function as an infallible guide to action.

Paul commands his disciple Timothy to "fight the good fight and hold fast to faith and a good conscience. Some men, by rejecting the guidance of conscience, have made shipwreck of their faith" { 1 Tim 1: 19 f }.

In the final analysis, then, the wisdom and the judgment of the Church are important, but they are not ultimately important.

Therefore, the genuinely important role of Church teaching must never be allowed to deteriorate into a "a loyalty test" for Catholics. Is a Catholic who finds himself or herself able to agree with the judgment of the church a better Catholic than one who cannot? We must say so. For just as to use Church teaching properly is to celebrate it, to ask it to be more than it is to destroy it. To make of that valuable and cherished source of moral wisdom a tool for ecclesiastical discipline or a measure of religious fidelity is to betray it. Indeed, to see the moral teaching of the Church as a test of Catholic loyalty is ultimately to violate the nature of the Church, the nature of humanity and surely the nature of conscience.

What do mean by the " formation of conscience"?

The journey of the Christian begins at the moment of conception and ends on death when one is re-united with God and enters a new state of being. Their calling in life is to be the Christian fully alive-" repent and believe, the Kingdom of God has come". Moral philosophy is the old fashioned name for ethics while moral theology is the discussion of the principles which govern the behaviour of man/woman.

James Fowler described Faith Development in six stages.

Stage 1; extends from infancy to approximately age 6.

We receive faith from our parents, not by formal teaching but by picking up basic parental attitudes towards God, Christ, prayer, the Church and so on. The child's vision of God is that of a loving parent or threatening person.... which ever the parent projects on to the child. The child is intuitive... picks up the moods etc. from parent - adult.

Stage 2; generally extends from age 7 to 12. The child receives faith from a parent or parent substitute e. g. siblings, member of extended family or a teacher in school. We pass on " stories" of Christianity-what we believe and what we do because of what we believe. We pass these beliefs and actions to children in a simple literalform. Children love stories.

Stage 3; begins at age 13 and for many extends right through adulthood. The child now receives faith from one's environment or group. The game plan in life is to belong to a group. Now the child wants to get into middle of

a group and stay there. They want to be members and do what the group does. There is security in the group-the herd instinct!

Stage 4; this is called a transition stage.... when one realises that one is accountable for one's life. One is responsible for one's faith and one realises that hiding in a group is no longer possible. Leaving stage 3 means that we feel a greater need for community.

Stage 5 ; is attained at about age 30.... we become mature, liberated persons. We can now deal with organisation and individual uniqueness, logic and intuition. The whole world is now open to us.

Stage 6 ; the minimal age for attaining this stage is 38.

Fowler says that very few of us reach this stage. The person here becomes a God lover, a people lover, a community person, a strong individual, a pioneer, a barrier breaker e. g. St. Paul.

When we speak of conscience 1, we are referring to a general sense of value, an awareness of personal responsibility, which is utterly characteristic of the human person. To be human is to be accountable. It is to be a being in charge of one's life. This human capacity for self-direction equally implies a human responsibility for good direction. Indeed, so much is this true that we question the "humanity of anyone who lacks an awareness of value". We have varying opinions as to what is right or wrong only because we have common realisation that it makes a difference whether a thing is right or wrong. Thus every discussion of moral values, every consideration of moral questions, has on its presupposition the existence of conscience/ 1. The

human person has such a conscience, and only because of that fact is the person genuinely and truly human.

What can we say of conscience ?

We can assert that the word "conscience", as it is generally used both in ordinary conversation and in theology, points at one or other of three quite different ideas and for purposes of simplicity, it will be referred to as conscience / 1, conscience / 2. and conscience / 3. The existence of conscience / 1 does not mean that we "rest on our laurels". Quite the contrary, conscience / 1 forces individual human beings to search out the objective moral values of their situation. They feel obliged to analyse their behaviour and their world, to seek to discover what is the really good thing and what is not. This search, this exercise of moral reasoning, can also be termed an act of conscience, conscience / 2. "My conscience tells me that it is wrong to take that money". Here we understand conscience / 2.

conscience / 2 deals with the specific perception of values, concrete individual values. It emerges in the ongoing process of reflection, discussion and analysis in which human beings have always engaged.

At the level of conscience / 2, we can differ and disagree. Some may find it right to withhold taxes used to wage war, while others will find it wrong. Some may judge our culture to be morally depraved, while others will consider it an advancement over previous ages. People disagree and that is characteristic of conscience / 2. So when we speak of conscience / 2, we are speaking of a fragile reality. We are speaking of an aspect of humankind that needs all the help it can get. It needs to be educated. Individual persons are

not always to "see what's there". They need assistance. If they are sincere persons, they will engage in the process known as "formation of conscience". For that, indeed is a characteristic of conscience / 2: it needs to be formed. It needs to be guided, directed and illuminated. It needs to be assisted in many ways.

Conscience / 2, then, is quite different from conscience / 1. Its not universal, at least in its conclusions and judgments.

Conscience / 3 is consummately concrete, for it is the concrete judgment of specific persons pertaining to their own immediate action. But for all that concreteness, the judgment of conscience / 3 remains infallible. That is to say, it constitutes the final norm by which a person's action must be guided. Why is that ?. The answer lies in the unique conjunction of conscience /1 and conscience /2. It was conscience / 2 that led us to analyse and understand our situation in a particular

{ fallible } way. We also have conscience / 1. That aspect of conscience demands, insists, requires { infallibly } that we seek to do good and avoid evil. " Everyone, of course, must ultimately follow his conscience, this means that he must do right as he sees it right { conscience /3 } with desire and effort to find and to do what is right { conscience / 2 }."

Fr. Bernard Haring, The Law of Christ 1.. 151.

Conclusion:

In a fundamental way, then, the Church finds itself in the same situation as the individual moral person. Just as the individual's conscience / 2 must

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search for the truth of its situation and, once found, must kneel before that truth, so much the “conscience” of the Church. We look to that ecclesial conscience with a certain confidence and trust, but we do not ask of it what it cannot give. Throughout the whole exercise of conscience / 2, as we maturely and prudently listen for whatever wisdom we can receive, we never forget that we are looking, not for “the approved”, not the “permitted”, but for “the good”. We and the Church together search for the true values of our situation, and once we find those values we accept them as challenges for our lives. It is that truth, that goodness, that is Supreme; and to that both and moral agent must bow.