

Assess the view that conscience need not always be obeyed

[Philosophy](#)



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“Assess the view that the conscience need not always be obeyed” (35 marks)

Conscience is the inner conviction that something is right or wrong. In a religious discussion, it may be thought of as the ‘voice of God’, speaking within the individual, and even as a direct revelation from God. John Newman defines the conscience as “the voice of God”, a principle planted within us, before we have had any training, although training and experience are necessary for its strength, growth, and due formation that is an “internal witness for both the existence and the law of God”.

Newman shows how the light of conscience, active in every human heart, finds fulfillment not in subjectivity and in the communion of the Catholic Church. Newman’s view was that it is often said that second thoughts are best. So they are in matters of judgment but not in matters of conscience. Aquinas saw the conscience as the natural ability of a rational human being to understand the difference between right and wrong, and to apply the most basic moral principles to particular situations.

Aquinas thought that there would be problems with people following their own moral sense, which led him to natural moral law (NML). He thought that everyone should follow NML because they are moral laws found in nature (e. g. sex for procreation). He thought that the conscience was the intellectual part of you because you work out what to do using natural reasoning. Without following NML, people might have distorted judgments from their passions, ignorance and society and therefore different views on right and wrong.

Therefore although he says that it is always right to follow one’s conscience, he does recognise that people may still get things wrong, through ignorance
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or making a mistake. Therefore Aquinas would not say that conscience should always be obeyed because a person may not be aware of the relevant moral principle. In order for conscience to work, a person needs to have some background information about what is considered right and wrong. The idea of conscience is used as a tool for applying already accepted moral principles.

Aquinas considers conscience to be the means that individuals use to apply the general moral principle that they hold. Aquinas believed that it is always right to follow your conscience when you apply the right moral principles to each individual situation to the best of your ability. It does not mean that by following your conscience that you will always be right, if your principles are wrong then your conscience will lead you astray. Aquinas was overall saying that the conscience can be wrong if the reasoning through was wrong.

In contrast, Copleston makes the important point that for most people the emotions rather than reason provide the starting point for moral choice. Joseph Butler viewed the conscience differently by believing that the conscious was a way of guarding or controlling influence over the different aspects of human nature. Butler argued that there were two different aspects to human beings; one being the passions and appetites, including the affections people have and also that there are more thoughtful aspects of benevolence towards others and conscience, as well as self-love.

Butler argued that these various parts were ordered in hierarchy, that there are situations where the conscience, being superior in the hierarchy, is able to over-rule the promptings of the appetites of affection. For Butler, the moral life was a matter of getting the hierarchy ordered in the right way. In <https://assignbuster.com/assess-the-view-that-conscience-need-not-always-be-obeyed/>

this hierarchy, conscience comes at the top, because it has the additional role of sorting out the conflicting claims of self-love and benevolence and that the balance is crucial for making moral decisions.

In some ways, Butler's account of the role of conscience is rather like Plato's view that reason should control appetite. His overall view was that a good person is someone who has his or her priorities well sorted, with the promptings of conscience ranking highest among them. Newman defines conscience as "the voice of God", "a principle planted within us, before we have had any training, although training and experience are necessary for its strength, growth, and due formation" that is an "internal witness of both the existence and the law of God. Newman shows how the light of the conscience, active in every human heart, finds fulfillment not in subjectivity and individualism, but in obedience to the teachings of the Pope in the communication of the Catholic Church. He said that it is often that second thoughts are best. So they are in matters of judgment but not matters of conscience. Freud's two key aspects to his approach were assertion that sexual desire is the prime motivating drive in all humans, and the importance of the unconscious mind.

Freud's theory of the conscience is entirely in conflict with all of the positions of Aquinas, Butler, and Newman. He saw the conscience as part of the unconscious mind, and believed that it arose as a result of bad experience in early life as well as disapproval from parents and society. Our human psyche is equated within the ego (our conscious personality) which balances the 'ID' (our desires) and the 'SUPEREGO' (our guilt). To be ruled by your superego would make you overly judgmental, inflexible, and irrational.

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Freud would argue against allowing the conscience to have control over our decisions about how we act. Freud believed that the conscience was a concept of the mind that sought to make sense of disorder and deal with the conflict that guilt brings. Freud believed that during our early upbringing we accept certain values and beliefs about morality and society, which may at some stage be rejected by our moral reasoning. However, these early formed values and beliefs still continue to influence our morality through the conscience that seeks to deal with the conflict that the early beliefs and later beliefs bring. ?