



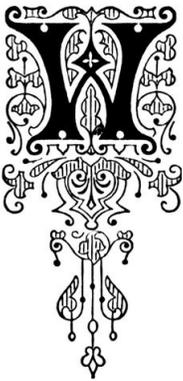
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RETRIEVING CONSCIENCE

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WHenever I treat the issue of conscience in my undergraduate survey of ethics, I ask the students to prepare for class by sketching their own spontaneous definition of conscience. My favorite is: “My conscience is my inner dog which barks when I break my diet.” Most of the definitions tend to fall into emotivist, intuitionist or mystical accounts of conscience.

For the aspiring emotivist, conscience is a reservoir of moral sentiments. The following definitions are typical of the emotivist approach: “Conscience is the feeling that we should do something in particular.” “Conscience is an emotion about what we’ve done.” “Conscience is a feeling about good and evil.” The student emotivists might disagree on the temporal traits of conscience - whether, for example, conscience is primarily antecedent to or consequent upon human action. They agree, however, that conscience involves arational emotions of attraction or repulsion concerning a particular object of moral choice.

For the young intuitionists, conscience is a faculty which provides immediate moral guidance. Their definitions frequently assimilate conscience to one of the senses. “I see conscience as an inner light.” “Conscience is an inner voice which says ‘yes’ or ‘no’ when I have a problem.” As one student poetically phrased it, “My conscience is an internal lighthouse in the storm of the world.” For the budding intuitionists, conscience is an immediate source of moral direction which needs no further justification.

The more mystical definitions add a religious twist to the intuitionist account. The following definitions are exemplary of the mystical account: “Conscience is the voice of God within me.” “I think that conscience is how God makes me know what’s right.” One punchy definition argues: “Conscience is being locked up with God. He talks and you’d better listen.” The accounts of conscience which I classify as “mystical” all stress an immediate apprehension of God and God’s will. As such, they differ from other religious accounts of conscience which emphasize ecclesial or scriptural mediation.

These undergraduate assessments of conscience reflect, in an informal manner, certain approaches to conscience defended by systematic philosophers and theologians. The emotivists echo Ayer’s theory of the purely emotive nature of moral judgments.¹ The intuitionists parallel the “moral sense” theory developed by Shaftesbury² and revived by Prichard.³ The mystical account echoes classical Quaker doctrine of “the inner light”⁴ and a long tradition of American naturalism.⁵ These definitions of conscience also reflect a common understanding of morality in contemporary American culture. Despite their variations, these assessments of conscience conceive moral judgment as the spontaneous product of each subject’s idiosyncratic feelings, impulses and experience. Such a subjectivist account of conscience posits moral judgment as an unmediated decision of the isolated individual.

Since such decisions of conscience are not based upon reason, they are impervious to rational scrutiny by another. Since such decisions are the spontaneous work of the autonomous individual, the contribution of social bodies (such as church and state) remains moot. It is not surprising that with such a subjectivist account of conscience, the

chief political virtue emerges as a vague tolerance: the defense of that personal psychic space where each individual undergoes the private drama of fabricating moral values and choices.

To counter the subjectivist impasse fostered by emotivist and intuitionist approaches, it can be useful to revive the neoscholastic theory of conscience. Austin Fagothey provides a definition of conscience typical of this tradition: "Conscience may ... be defined as the practical judgment of reason upon an individual act as good and to be performed, or as evil and to be avoided."⁶ This definition insists upon the intellectual dimension of conscience. Conscience emerges as the judgment of reason upon human action to be performed or shunned. This process of practical reasoning is usually conceived as one of syllogistic deduction, wherein the moral subject implicitly moves from a major premise (a moral principle, such as "Murder is wrong") through a minor premise (a particular object, such as "Action X involves murder") to a practical conclusion ("Action X, therefore, should not be performed.")⁷ In practice, however, this process of practical reasoning is often problematic. The enormous neoscholastic literature on the resolution of a doubtful conscience⁸ and the elaboration of the principle of double effect⁹ witnesses the complexity in evaluating a specific moral object.

This particular approach to conscience not only defends the role of the intellect in moral judgment. It permits the elaboration of a more social account of conscience than theories built upon sentiment or intuition. This social note emerges in the formation of conscience. The effective development of the conscientious intellect involves a recurrent transcendence of the self through critical dialogue with secular and religious communities. While the individual subject maintains responsibility for his or her moral decisions, the practical intellectual capacity to render such judgments can only emerge through social mediation.

The intellectual nature itself of conscience, as delineated in the neoscholastic tradition, places conscience within a network of social interaction. In order to reason concerning a proposed course of action, the moral agent must inform himself on general principles and specific applications. While the moral agent might be inclined toward certain general goods (such as life or truth), such apprehensions remain too vague for much of the repertoire of conscientious decision-making. It is

only through punctual interaction with others that the conscience may refine its inclinations into specific principles, such as "One may never directly kill an innocent human being." Specific applications require even more detailed interaction. The determination, for example, of whether a particular military action does in fact constitute the direct killing of an innocent human being requires a careful weighing of the evidence provided by different actors in the public policy debate. The particular judgments of possible actions in different circumstances engage the moral subject in analogous reasoning, which cannot rely on the moral subject's limited experience alone but must depend upon the moral judgments of others in the agent's community.

Moral sentiments can be communicated by osmosis. Repugnance to members of a particular ethnic group, for example, can be successfully transmitted in the humor and gestures of a given family. The social communication of moral principles, however, inasmuch as they are built upon justificatory evidence, are open to the critical scrutiny of the reason which transmits and the reason which receives such information. Theses concerning a certain ethnic group's equality to another can be evaluated upon the basis of the evidence given to support them. Moments of moral maturity can emerge precisely when such evidence contradicts the feelings of the moral agent and prods the agent to choose a certain act because of the weight of relevant reasons.

The formation of conscience requires social scrutiny not only to shape the norms and applications of the practical intellect. Social interaction forms the quality of the conscientious reasoning process. Neoscholastic literature developed an elaborate typology of the various tonalities of conscience, ranging from the lax to the rigorous.¹⁰ The question here is neither the content of reason nor even the accuracy of the particular syllogism it operates in the face of a specific moral dilemma. The question is more one of the global sensitivity of the conscience, its very capacity to identify moral problems, to effectively use moral resources in order to deliberate and to provide a plausible solution to an ethical problem.

Social interaction, beginning with the elementary dialogue of praise and blame, shapes the quality of conscientious reasoning. Failure in this formation indicates precisely the presence of a practical intellect which cannot properly detect moral objects as they appear in the social landscape. The lax conscience, oblivious to

the moral demands of the other, serenely exempts itself from moral choices which involve the least sacrifice. The rigorist conscience, on the other hand, paralyzes itself by the minute examination of the slightest problem and by a standard of absolute certitude for moral judgment which the peripeties of social action simply cannot bear. One of the chief tasks of the formation of conscience lies in the shaping of a practical intellect capable of discerning moral evidence, detecting relevant circumstances and choosing responsible action which suffers neither from insouciance nor scrupulosity. Much of the interaction in the familial, amical and religious cells of social life contributes to this refinement of the practical intellect in the art of moral discernment. The end here is more the formation of a moral style, rather than a moral program, for the intellect, as it weighs alternative courses of action. It is not surprising that this quality of the conscience is often described by philosophers through the aesthetic metaphors of balance, proportion or harmony.

Social mediation is also crucial in the religious formation of conscience. Unfortunately, as Robert Bellah has argued in his famous analysis of “Sheilahism,”¹¹ the contemporary American notion of the religious roots of conscience tends to correspond to the “mystical” theory I discussed earlier. The voice of God is conceived as immediately accessible to the moral agent through simple introspection. In fact, the religious formation of conscience operates through a complex network of social interaction. The Scriptures set before the moral subject the narrative of salvation which discloses the divine origin and horizon of the moral enterprise.¹² The Eucharist incorporates the particular moral choices of the agent into the fundamental paschal mystery of Christ in the communion of the Church.¹³ The magisterial tradition of the Church traces the contours of a conscientious life, not only sensitive to the demands of the good, but united in docility to the Holy Spirit.¹⁴ The charismatic tradition of the Church, embodied in her hagiographical narratives, sketches the history and geography of moral conscience in its full maturity.¹⁵

This religious mediation places the maturation of conscience in an itinerary of conversion. Rather than being immured within itself, the practical intellect deepens its moral horizons and sharpens its ethical discernment through participation in the ecclesial milieu.

The social mediation of conscience is not to be confused with the strict social determination of conscience. I may have learned from my family and church that stealing is wrong. However, stealing is wrong because it deprives others of their rightful property. It is not wrong because certain religious and secular authorities oppose it. The social apprenticeship of conscience is not a blind adherence to the voice of one’s master. On the contrary, authentic moral formation involves the expansion of the intellect’s vision of the good, the refinement of the intellect’s skill in executing complex moral acts and the informing of the practical intellect through justifying reasons which may contradict the moral agent’s ancestral prejudices. The reduction of the social occasions for learning the demands of the moral order into the causes of morality itself risks destroying the role and the rights of the intellect in the social itinerary of conscientious formation.

Contemporary efforts at retrieving the intellectual component of conscience must not succumb to the rationalist illusion of a moral reason sufficient to itself through an internal reservoir of clear and distinct ideas. If the neoscholastic account of conscience defended the rights of the intellect, in particular moral judgments, it equally stressed the fragility of the practical intellect. The manualists repeatedly detail the ignorance, the passion and the prejudice which vitiate the judgments of conscience.¹⁶ It is precisely the finitude and the egotism of the intellect which opens the human conscience to the social mediations necessary for its maturation. The social instances of intellectual formation, psychological refinement and sacramental inspiration are predicated upon a vulnerable conscience open to transformation by the human and divine other.



NOTES

1Cf. A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Gollancz, 1952), pp. 102-113.

2Cf. Anthony Ashley Cooper, *Third Earl of Shaftesbury, An Inquiry Concerning Virtue* (1699), ed. by Joseph Filonowicz (Delmar: *Scholars' Facsimiles*, 1991), pp. 2-81.

3Cf. H. A. Prichard, *Moral Obligation* (Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 1968), pp. 1-17, 87-163.

4For a study of the classical Quaker doctrine of the Inner Light, cf. Hugh Barbour and J. William Frost, *The Quakers* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), pp. 95-107, 173-174.

5For a presentation of the persistent American strain of religious intuitionism, cf. Catherine Albanese, *Nature Religion in America* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1990).

6Austin Fagothey, *Right and Reason* (St. Louis: Mosby, 1959), p. 209. The classic locus for the neoscholastic discussion of conscience is found in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* I, q. 79, aa. 12, 13.

7Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 209-210; Martin O'Keefe, *Known From the Things That Are* (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1987), pp. 129-132.

8Cf. Fagothey, pp. 212-221.

9Cf. Fagothey, pp. 152-156; O'Keefe, pp. 50-61.

10Cf. Fagothey, p. 210; O'Keefe, p. 125.

11Cf. Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: U. of Cal. Press, 1985).

12For a discussion of the role of scriptural narrative in ethics, cf. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame: UND Press, 1981), pp. 59-78.

13For an analysis of the roots of ethics in the liturgy, cf. John Baldovin, *City, Church and Renewal* (Washington, DC: Pastoral Press, 1991), pp. 59-78.

14For an authoritative presentation of the relationship between magisterium and morality in Catholicism, cf. *Catechisme del l'Eglise Catholique* (Paris: Mame/Plon), pp. 419-423.

15For a retrieval of hagiography from a postmodernist perspective, cf. Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 1-30.

16Cf. Fagothey, pp. 104-110; O'Keefe, pp. 37-48.