

## What is Conscience? Should it always be obeyed?

**(Please note: These are rough notes for a lecture, mostly taken from the relevant sections of *Philosophy and Ethics* and should not be reproduced or used verbatim.)**

Conscience is the inner conviction that something is right or wrong. It is found in both secular and religious ethical discussions.

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. In the New Testament (*Romans 2:15*) conscience is described as the witness to the 'requirements of the law' being written on the heart. The implication of this would seem to be that, through following their conscience, everyone can follow the requirements of the divine law.

In a secular discussion, it is more likely to be seen as the natural way in which people are able to apply their general moral principles to the particular situations in which they find themselves.

Questions to consider...

- Is it always right to follow one's conscience?
- Why do people who follow their conscience sometimes differ in what they believe to be right?
- Which comes first, your principles or your conscience? (If you did not have any principles, could you have a conscience?)

Conscience as a source of moral authority may be linked to the emotions:

Rousseau held that there were two primitive emotions, one of which was a natural repugnance at the sufferings of others. He believed that this moral sense was innate, and was only masked by social convention.

Similarly Frances Hutcheson believed that people had a natural sense of benevolence, and that this - rather than reason - was the source of morality.

In other words, it is because we feel that something is right or wrong (rather than just be convinced in the course of an ethical argument) that we also feel the force of regret when we do wrong, and therefore that we develop a conscience.

In order to be able to operate, conscience seems to need two things:

- freedom
- knowledge of the good.

Let's take each of these:

Freedom

Unless you are free to do something, it makes no sense for your conscience to tell you to do or not to do it.

'Should implies can.'

'Morality implies freedom.'

If you are not free to choose to act in a way that reflects your wishes and intentions, then you cannot be blamed for what happens, since praise and blame – and the whole array of moral arguments that stem from them – are based on the assumption that individuals are free to choose how they act, and to take responsibility for what they do.

Hence, the distinction is generally made in law between an action committed by someone who is of sound mind and someone who is certified insane. Being insane is regarded in law as a mitigating circumstance – the person is judged ill, rather than good or bad. In this case, being insane renders moral considerations inappropriate, because the person is unable to make a rational decision about how to behave.

In considering the issues of science and religion (see above page 00) we examined the problems raised for religious belief by the idea of determinism – that everything that happens is explicable in terms of the laws of nature, and could not be other than it is. In terms of ethics, 'Determinism' is the view that, whether we realise it or not, we are actually determined in all that we do by factors that are outside our control. This creates particular problems both for the meaning of moral statements – and hence the validity of ethics as a whole – and also for the sense of moral obligation.

If, following Kant, we know what it is to experience a moral demand (a 'categorical imperative' – see above page 00) and to judge that something is done with a 'good will', that implies that we also

believe that people have a measure of freedom to choose how then act. **Without freedom, moral obligation makes no sense.**

It is clear that **nobody is totally free. There are three forms of limitations – and the question we need to ask is this:** Do these limitations mean that we do not need to have a bad conscience if our action is influenced by them?

1. Physical limitations. There are some things that I am physically incapable of doing. I cannot be blamed for this, and such limitations have little ethical significance.
2. Psychological limitations. This is more complicated. If the science of psychology can predict choices, then – even if I sense that I am free – I am in fact determined by my background and psychological make-up. Am I therefore responsible for what I do?
3. Social limitations. We may be limited by the financial, social and political structures under which we live. Does conforming to the norms of a society in which I have grown up justify the way I see moral choices?  
In considering the moral significance of an action, we need to assess the degree of freedom available to the agent.

#### Knowledge

Equally, conscience implies some innate knowledge of what is 'good', for without that, it is difficult to see how conscience could suggest what one should do.

So conscience plays a part in relating a general sense of what is good (often in the form of moral rules), to the situations in which we are free to choose what to do. But if it is a natural and universal human phenomenon (without which you might be branded a psychopath), what part does it play in moral decision making?

**G E Moore**, in claiming that 'good' could not be defined, nevertheless insisted that people knew what it meant - and that, of course, implies some innate sense or intuition.

In these and many other thinkers, a basic or innate sense of right and wrong lies beneath subsequent logical arguments about moral choice. In this sense, conscience becomes the starting point of morality, for without that sense of right and wrong, moral issues and arguments would never have arisen.

#### Aquinas

Aquinas sought to reconcile philosophy with Christian teaching – and that applies to his views on conscience as much as on other things. So what is the Christian view?

In the New Testament, the word for conscience is *syneidesis*. This refers to the pain suffered by one who goes against his or her moral principles, and positively as having a 'good conscience' before God. It is also described as the witness to the 'requirements of the law' being written on the heart of those who are not under the law (see *Romans 2:15*) - in other words, conscience acts as a guide, even where specific moral principles are not taken into consideration.

It is also interesting to note from the same epistle (*chapter 1 verses 18ff*) that the wrath of God is described as being revealed from heaven against those who go against his moral laws, and the justification for such wrath is there is no excuse or plea of ignorance since God's invisible qualities of eternal power and divine nature have been revealed in creation. The implication here is that everyone has a conscience which can respond, even if unconsciously, to the requirements of the divine law. In a sense this presents conscience rather as part of a 'natural law' theory, in that the recognition of basic religious and moral principles is built into the structure of the universe and human nature.

Thus, within Christian moral teaching, conscience is regarded as the voice of God within the soul.

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. He did recognise however that there were problems with simply leaving everyone to follow their own moral sense – for example, a person might have the judgment clouded by their passions, or by ignorance, or by long established habits. He also saw what different societies had different views of what constituted right and wrong.

Hence, although he is able to say that it is always right to follow one's conscience, he does recognise that people may still get things wrong, through ignorance or through making a mistake. There were therefore two possible ways in which that process could go wrong:

A person might not be aware of the relevant moral principle. In other words, for conscience to work, a person needs to have some background information about what is considered right and wrong. A person might know and agree to a general moral principle, but be unaware that it applied in particular situation.

It is therefore quite possible for a person to do what – by any objective standard – might be considered wrong, and yet to be right in following his or her conscience. In other words, his idea of conscience is very much as a tool for applying already accepted moral principles.

Notice carefully what is implied by this. Aquinas considers conscience to be the means by which individuals apply the general moral principles that they hold. When Aquinas says it is always right to follow your conscience, what he means is that it is always right to apply your moral principles to each individual situation, to the best of your ability. It does not mean that, by following conscience, one is always in the right – for if your principles are wrong, then your conscience is going to lead you astray.

Notice the way in which Aquinas' thinking about conscience reflects his general position on ethics. He believes that people need to accept general principles, and they apply them (with the help of conscience) to particular situations.

But is that actually how morality works? Do we always use reason, guided by conscience, to determine what we do? In commenting on Aquinas, Copleston makes the important point that for most people the emotions rather than reason provide the starting point for moral choices.

## Butler

Whereas Aquinas sees the conscience as the means of applying moral principles, Joseph Butler gave conscience a rather different role, as a guarding or controlling influence over the different aspects of human nature. He wanted to avoid an approach to human nature that was based on egoism, and to provide a place for conscience, recognising that people sometimes restrain their appetites for the sake of doing what is right.

He considered that there were two very different parts or aspects to human beings. On the one hand there were the passions and appetites, including the affections that people have. On the other, there were the more thoughtful aspects of benevolence towards others and conscience, as well as self-love.

Butler argued that these various parts of the self were ordered in a hierarchy. Thus there are situations when conscience, being superior in the hierarchy, is able to over-rule the promptings of the appetites or the affections. For Butler, the moral life was a matter of getting that hierarchy ordered in the right way. But within that 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 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. When a person acts in a morally appropriate way, according to Butler's theory, it means that the conscience sorts out the balance between self-love and benevolence towards others, and controls the appetites and affections accordingly.

In a sense, you might sum up Butler's view by saying that a good person is someone who has his or her priorities well sorted, with the promptings of conscience ranking highest among them.

### Note:

Clearly, Butler's view has the advantage of accounting for moral dilemmas. We have to balance which part of our nature should take priority in any situation, and that is why we may sometimes feel uncertain about what we should do.

But are we socially conditioned (along with our conscience)?

Is my feeling that something is right, just another expression of what my upbringing and society have impressed on me. Is my conscience no more than a particular expressed within myself of something much broader?

One possibility is that all our moral views are **socially and culturally conditioned**. Thus, for example, **Hegel** spoke of the 'spirit' of each age, which determined moral as well as cultural and

aesthetic awareness. If this is merely a conscious awareness, it means that we judge what we should do in terms of the values that are held by the society within which we live. If, for example, we are utilitarian, we will consider the greatest happiness for the greatest number, but the nature of that 'happiness' will come from the values of our society. If, on the other hand, social values have become embedded also in our unconscious mind, then we may experience them as the promptings of conscience. In other words, our conscience reflects all that society has taught us.

## Freud

Conscience is closely associated with a sense of guilt, in that we feel guilty if we go against our conscience. This was of particular interest to Freud, who sought to give a **psychological** explanation for it.

He argued that, through our early upbringing, we learn values that continue to influence our moral awareness and our conscience later in life. He distinguished between three elements in the mind - the *ego*, the *id* and the *super-ego*. At its simplest level, the *ego* is the rational self, the *id* is the self at the level of its physical and emotional needs, and the *super-ego* is the controlling, restraining self. Clearly, conscience is an aspect of the operation of the super-ego.

For our purposes, the importance of this view is that it challenges the role of the conscience, and also raises questions about our freedom.

If conscience is simply an expression of the unconscious application of rules that we have been given in our early childhood, then it does not qualify to be taken seriously in an ethical discussion, since it is no more than an expression of the wishes of one's parents or other significant adults. It cannot be the voice of God, or the highest element in the hierarchy of the self, but simply an unconscious return to our ethical potty training!

But equally, if our conscience shapes our moral decision making, and if it comes from the unconscious promptings of our early years, then are we really free to make a moral choice at all? It could be argued that our external rules are given by society and our internal conscience are given by our parents – and we are trapped in the middle!

## Innate or acquired?

Freud's challenge to the traditional idea of conscience raises a key question: is conscience innate or acquired? If it is innate, then we may expect everyone to have a conscience, and for that conscience to operate in much the same way in every individual. Why then are there differences in what people think they ought to do? Clearly because the moral principles they hold are different. But where did they get those principles? Well, they could come from religion, or upbringing, or society in general. In other words, they could have been acquired.

Notice however that it is the moral principles that are acquired, not the conscience itself. The conscience appears more like a **skill** than a set of rules. It is the ability to apply rules to practical situations of moral choice. Like other skills, listening to conscience can be developed (i.e. someone who sensitive to moral issues might be described as having a well-developed conscience).

As a skill, it may well be innate. This is suggested by the fact that those who appear to have absolutely no conscience at all are regarded as psychopaths – there is something 'wrong' with them, then are not normal. It is normal to have a conscience of some sort. However, its operation will depend on the moral principles or parental rules that it applies – and these are almost certainly acquired.

Key for both religious and secular ethics - integrity:

Conscience is also related closely to the idea of **integrity**. If we do one thing whilst believing that we should really be doing another, conscience is the vehicle of that intuition.

There are moments when you do what you think to be right, but feel emotionally troubled by it – perhaps because someone is going to feel hurt or let down, and you do not like causing them pain. At other times your emotions tell you to do something, and yet your rational self known it to be foolish.

You may even have what you might think of as an 'old fashioned' conscience about some things – perhaps through what your parents have taught you – but feel embarrassed because it does not fit with the views of your friends, or with what you see as your lifestyle.

In all these situations you can feel torn one way or another. And that is exactly why moral issues present problems – they are never absolutely clear cut from every point of view or they would not be moral dilemmas!

The ideal of conscience – especially if you follow the views of Butler – is that it should ensure that your reason and your emotions are in line behind what you are doing – in other words, you act out of conviction in a way that is emotionally satisfying.

At the same time, what is being challenged is the fact that we are not acting with integrity. **Integrity implies a good conscience. Conscience may be like a thermostat, adjusting what we feel we should do in order to bring our emotions and reason closer into line, so that we can act with integrity.**

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