

Conscience Michael Lacewing

Varieties of conscience

The term 'conscience' has not been used in just one way, and we cannot assume that the different ways in which it has been used 'really' refer to just one thing. Here are four meanings:

1. Conscience involves feelings of self-judgment, esp. guilt. This is the sense in which one has a 'bad conscience' about something. A good conscience is usually thought only to involve the absence of such bad feelings, rather than a sense of pride or self-worth.
2. Conscience is the 'faculty' by which we discover moral truths. This faculty is traditionally connected to the voice of God 'within' and/or to reason. This sense of conscience presupposes that *there are* moral truths.
3. Conscience is that set of moral principles that a person adheres to as a matter of moral integrity. 'Matters of conscience' and 'conscientious objectors' use this sense.
4. Finally, conscience is that by which we examine our motives and actions. In this sense, we might 'lack conscience' or if we are over-anxious about morality, have an 'oversensitive' conscience.

One theory of conscience which links all four is this: conscience is essentially the faculty by which we discover moral truth (2). As our personal source of moral truth, we use it to judge ourselves (4), which can produce feelings of guilt (1); and it leads to our adherence to certain moral principles (3). But is this true?

Conscience and disagreement

One striking difficulty about conscience is that people's consciences apparently tell them different things. If everyone's conscience is how they discover moral truth, then we might expect similar answers. There are four solutions:

- a. it is not true that morality requires the same thing from different people (a type of relativism) – so people's consciences can differ but still all be right; or
- b. some people's consciences don't 'work properly', so they don't deliver moral truths reliably;
- c. people's consciences only *apparently* tell them different things, e.g. people misinterpret their conscience;
- d. conscience does not discover moral truths.

The difficulty with (a) is that some people just seem to be wrong! For example, some Nazis said their conscience urged them to participate in the Holocaust. If we thought conscience was the *only* standard of morality, morality turns out to be very inconsistent.

The difficulty with (b) is knowing whether a conscience is working properly or not. If conscience is what we use to discover moral truths, what do we use to check if the 'truths'

conscience delivers are really true? A similar difficulty with (c) is how we know when someone is correctly listening to what their conscience tells them, when they are not being fully honest with themselves, and even whether they can tell.

Aquinas on obeying one's conscience

Aquinas argued that there are actually two aspects to discovering moral truth. 'Synderesis' is a faculty that discovers very basic moral principles, e.g. 'Do good', 'Avoid evil'. Everyone's synderesis says the same; it is infallible. In this way, everyone is capable of a basic moral sense, everyone knows they should not do evil. 'Conscientia' (conscience) is just the faculty of practical reason that tells us what *is* good or evil in particular situations. This is not infallible, and a 'corrupted' conscientia may give the wrong answers.

Aquinas argues that we should always obey our conscience. We should not try to do good ignoring our conscience. This does mean that, if our conscience is corrupted in some way, we will sometimes do what is (objectively) morally wrong.

This isn't inconsistent. To act against our conscience is to do what we personally feel is wrong (even if we have good reasons, e.g. obeying someone else). This is to set our will against the good (as we understand it), and this goes against the very nature of the will as Aquinas understands it. Because it is through conscience that we (think we) know what is right and wrong, we can never know that our conscience is wrong – so to act against it is always to act in favour of what we see as bad. Finally, Aquinas argues that the *main* thing that makes an act right or wrong is the motive; acting against our own conscience always suggests our motives aren't right.

Aquinas also argues that the *basic principles* of morality can be understood by everyone with enough experience to understand what they mean. He could therefore also argue that on many occasions when people's consciences seem to disagree, someone is not reasoning as well as they can.

The voice of God

Aquinas places a lot of emphasis on conscience as reason. As he believes in natural law, he believes that reason a very important way we discover God's commands. This is where conscience gets its authority from. Other religious thinkers have emphasised the *personal* nature of conscience, and so understood it as the voice of God.

H P Owen argued that the experience of conscience is evidence for God's existence. First, the demands of conscience don't feel invented. They feel demands on me from an external source. Conscience is not something I make up. Second, moral feelings are personal. The sorts of feelings conscience inspires – guilt, responsibility, regret – are all feelings that we have in personal relationships with other people. But we can feel this way even when there isn't anyone in particular we have wronged. If we stand in a moral relationship with God, we could explain why moral feelings are personal. Third, moral values are also personal – commands, duties and responsibilities also usually imply someone who gave the commands, who we have a duty or responsibility to. But not all moral situations involve another person. Understanding conscience as the voice of God would explain our experience of morality.

Freud

Sigmund Freud argued that conscience isn't essentially a rational faculty that discovers moral truths. He thought our sense of morality, especially the first and fourth senses of conscience, originated in our childhood experiences. As infants and children, we all love our parents. We want to be like them and to please them. Freud says we 'identify' with them. This sense grows first into an unconscious sense about how to be, an ideal for ourselves, something to live up to. Then it becomes more complex as we experience other authority figures as well. It becomes the 'superego'.

The superego is made of messages of the kind 'You ought to be like this', the results of identification. But it also contains prohibitions: 'You ought not to be like this', e.g. you're not allowed to be/do/feel that. The superego monitors and judges how we do, and is ready to comment – as a voice in our head – when we don't do well. This can produce feelings of guilt and humility, especially when there is a gap between what we feel we should do and what we feel we are *able* to do. However, Freud also thought the superego can congratulate us when we do well. (In this, he thinks feelings of real pride (not arrogance) stem from the superego; which is therefore more than conscience.)

Freud explains the personal nature of conscience commented on above in terms of conscience deriving from people. Conscience feels personal because it started in personal relationships. The experience of conscience is therefore not a good reason to believe that God exists.

Many of the feelings and thoughts produced by conscience are unconscious, Freud argued. His practice of psychoanalysis aimed to make them more conscious, to enable the person to bring them under control and decide more freely what to do. We are freer in our decisions when we don't decide on actions or judge ourselves by what we feel we *have* to aim at, but by what we *really want* (again, many things we want because we think we *should* want them – this is still the superego). The gap between what we can do and what we feel we should do gets much smaller. If we succeed in this, then we will feel guilty much less of the time.

In some ways, Freud's ideas on the conscience are very different from Aquinas. He opposes conscience to reason, and he doesn't argue that there is an objective morality. However, both Freud and Aquinas argue for the importance of *integrity* and reason. They just understand these terms differently.