

Conscience

Narrowly defined, conscience refers to the painful awareness of wrongdoing and to the seat of such feelings. A broader definition speaks of conscience as an inner source of moral authority that judges and guides us. The history of the idea of conscience is extraordinarily complex, touching most aspects of the history of morality. The concept cannot simply be explained through the history of terms (conscience, *Gewissen*, *conscientia*, *synt[d]eresis*, *suneidesis*) because their meanings vary depending on their contexts. One must look at what determine conscience in each case and especially at the concept of personality and the type of society that are involved. In Christian theology*, the concept of conscience varies according to given anthropological and soteriological concepts as well as the understandings of moral life in relation to God*, Christ*, and Spirit.

1. Antiquity

The first instance of the word *suneidèsis* is found in Democritus (VS B 297); the corresponding verb can be found, for example, in Xenophon (*Memorabilia* II) or Sophocles (*Antigone*) and means a "sharing of knowledge." The activity of conscience was unknown in primitive Greek culture. Homer's heroic characters, lacking in reflective moral awareness, locate the goodness of an action* not in intention* but in the consequences that it entails, especially with respect to reputation or dishonor. Moral identity is a function not of conscience but of the approval or disapproval from the group, which bestows honor or shame depending on whether one respects the conventions linked to traditional social roles. The tragedians are more interested in moral conflicts because tragic figures are less completely identified with convention. Aeschylus (*Agamemnon*) and especially Euripides (*Orestes*) describe the torment of the guilty person conscious or his fault by interiorizing the myth* of the Furies pursuing the criminal. This is still remote from later notions of conscience: the tragic hero suffers not only from internal conflict but also from the defilement imposed by destiny. Neither Plato nor Aristotle systematically discusses conscience. Later Platonists seemed to recognize conscience in Socrates' demon*, who warned him against wrongdoing (*Phaedrus*), although it was probably divinatory in character. In Aristotle, ethical knowing and judging are attributed to *phronèsis*.

The crucible for Western views of conscience was Roman Stoicism, for which conscience is an internal moral guide that approves or disapproves a conduct. The highest element in the human being is the presence of natural law* (Cicero, *De legibus*; Seneca, *Epistulae*), which can morally guide behavior and is known as such by reason. This is why Cicero identifies "right conscience" (*recta conscientia*) and "right reason" (*recta ratio*) in *De finibus*. This view of conscience as "a sacred spirit within us that observes and controls our good and bad actions" (*sacer intra nos spiritus malorum bonorumque nostrorum observator et custos*; Seneca, *Epistulae*), also found in Tacitus, Livy, and Quintillian, drifted into popular usage and formed part of the background to the New Testament.

2. Scripture

a) *Old Testament*. There is no term for conscience in the Old Testament, which nevertheless describes the troubles caused by remorse (1 Sm 24:5f.; 2 Sm 24:10; Ps 32:3f.; Is 57:21) and the peace* brought on by a clean conscience (Ps 26; Jb 27). "Heart" (1 Kgs 2:44, 83:38; Eccl 7:22; Jb 7:6) is the seat of self-knowledge, which depends on God's omniscience and omnipresence as lawgiver and judge (Is 139; Prv 16:2, 20, 27). The concept that conscience would play a deliberative or guiding role does not appear, however. In the Old Testament, reflective distance from God may be covert disobedience (Gn 3:1-7), and knowledge of God's law must be affective and practical rather than a cause for thought. The Septuagint (ancient translations* of the Bible) rarely uses *suneidèsis* (Eccl 10:20; Wis 17:11; Sir 6:26, 42:18).

b) *The New Testament*. Conscience is not an essential concept in the New Testament. The term is absent from the Gospels*, where the "heart" is still the center of moral knowledge and will (Mt 5:8, 5:28, 15:10-20; Mk 7:18-23; Lk 6:45). Conscience appears a number of times in the Paul's letters but without the connotations that it has today. Conscience is not the central theme of Pauline theology. Paul appeals to his good "conscience" to justify of his ministry* (Rom 9:1; 1 Cor 4:4; 2 Cor 1:12; compare Acts 23:1, 24:16) and waits for a similar judgment from others (2 Cor 4:2,

5:11). Romans 13:5 contains an anticipatory idea of conscience: Christians must obey the state to avoid a later condemnation. When Paul speaks of conscience when discussing the issue of flesh sacrificed to idols (1 Cor 8:1–13, 10:18–31; Rom 14)—passages that would be key in later theological developments—conscience is the capacity not of moral direction but of self-condemnation. The “strong” conscience, who knows the nothingness of idols, is free from self-accusation about consuming meat sacrificed to them, but this strong freedom should not scandalize the “weak” conscience, which, not possessing the same knowledge, may be wounded by such action. Here, conscience is not a source of absolute moral certainty (it is knowledge, not conscience, that liberates from scruple); nor does conscience act autonomously (the strong act out of love* for the weak). A further crucial passage for later thinkers is Romans 2:14–16; although the text is often thought to furnish exegetical warrant for the idea of a “natural law” written in the heart and guarded by conscience, it may be that Paul referred only to those pagans who “by nature do what the law requires” and not to humanity in general. Moreover, the center of gravity in Paul’s thinking lies elsewhere: it is Christ*, not nature, conscience, or law, that is ultimate (Gal 3:24). The pastorals refer to “good conscience” (1 Tm 1:5, 19), “clear conscience” (1 Tm 3:9; 2 Tm 1:3; compare 1 Pt 3:16, 21), and its opposite (1 Tm 4:2; Ti 1, 15), to speak of honesty. Although the usage here is less immediately soteriological (and closer to post-apostolic usage; see 1 Clem 1, 3, 24 and 41, 4), the connection between conscience, understood in this sense and faith* (1 Tm 1, 5, 19 and 3, 9) is important. In Hebrews, conscience is the locus of guilt, which is cleansed by Christ’s priestly sacrifice* (Heb 9:9, 14, 10:22; compare Ignatius, *Trall.* 7).

In the New Testament, therefore, conscience is a secondary notion. Introspective concerns are generally absent from the New Testament, which does not explain or justify behavior in terms of an “inner voice” attributed to God. Partly this is because of the weight accorded to public conventions and roles in a culture oriented to honor and shame. Further, the language and perspectives used are not that of later theologies or philosophies. What would be later associated with the notion of conscience, such as moral experience, control, and approval, is expressed in the New Testament in terms of Spirit, justification*, faith, and the return of the Lord to judge human beings (*parousia**). In this light, the New Testament differs both from Stoicism and from Philo’s notion of conscience as the organ of reproof (*elegkhos*) and inner judge (*dikastes*) presiding over and evaluating actions (*De fuga et inventione*, §118; *De decalogo*, §87).

3. Patristic and Medieval Period

a) *The Fathers.* Although systematic treatment of the subject is rare in the Fathers*, the notion of conscience gained importance during the patristic period. Drawing on Stoic sources (Christian Stoicism*), Origen develops the notion of moral principles universally known (*Contra Celsum* 1, 4, SC 132), and, in an important commentary of 1 Corinthians 2:11, he identifies conscience and the Spirit of God within us (*In Psalmos* 30, 6, PG 12, 1300 b), an idea that would be taken up again later. John Chrysostom* turns conscience into a key factor of morality: the voice of conscience reveals the moral law, which is the general or natural context in which Christian morality shows its specificity (*De statutis, Opera omnia*, 1834). Augustine*s view is significantly different: natural law theory is chastened by its repudiation of the moral optimism of Pelagianism*, and, although he can speak of the golden rule (Mt 7:12) as “inscribed in the conscience” (*scripta [in] conscientia; Confessions* 1, 18), conscience is essentially knowing that God knows us (10, 2) and a confirmation of divine judgments (*Enarrationes in psalmos* 7, 9, CChr.SL 38) rather than in relative detachment from divine presence.

b) *The Medieval Period.* Medieval discussions of conscience generally focus on two terms: *synteresis* (a corrupt translation of *suneidèsis*) and *conscientia*. In general, the discussion emerges from the passage in Pierre Lombard’s *Sentences* (c. 1100–60), in which he wonders about Romans 7:15 if there are two wills within the sinner in conflict with himself and in which he briefly refers to Jerome’s commentary of Ezekiel 1:4–14. Jerome identifies the eagle in Ezekiel’s vision with what he calls *synteresis*; if this capacity was retained after the Fall, Jerome asserts that some wicked persons did not retain what he calls *conscientia*. Commentators solved the contradiction by distinguishing *synteresis* as the ultimate ground of moral knowledge from *conscientia* as the application of principles. The distinction receives sophisticated treatment from Bonaventure* and Thomas* Aquinas. For Bonaventure, *conscientia* belongs to affectivity; as such, it is a *habitus*, a disposition, not a deduction. Aquinas, by contrast, views *conscientia* as an act of bringing moral principles to the actual situation (*De veritate* 17, 1), whereas *synteresis* is the *habitus* that contains the basic principles of natural law (*ST Ia IIae*, q. 94, a. 1, ad. 2). Unlike what would be done later, however, Aquinas views these principles more as a formal framework than as a set of rules whose application is to be determined with the help of a casuistry*.

The distinction between *synteresis* and *conscience*

explains how the issue of knowing whether conscience is always an obligation is dealt with. *Synderesis* cannot err; conscience, however, may err by not applying the principles correctly, but it must always be obeyed since obedience to God's law is a basic principle of *synderesis*. To disobey even a mistaken conscience is therefore to act against *synderesis*.

In all these debates, conscience is increasingly viewed as a guide in the moral realm rather than the seat of guilt. Although it operates in relative independence and not under God's direct impulse, conscience should not be construed subjectively. Aquinas's insistence on practical reason's reference to an objective moral order distinguishes him sharply from Abelard's intention-oriented and quasi-absolute conscience: "There is no sin that is not against conscience" (*non est peccatum nisi contra conscientiam*; *Ethica* 13).

4. Reformation

A decisive shift occurs with the Reformers, especially Luther*. Conscience no longer is associated with vows, asceticism*, and penance* (association strengthened at the Fourth Lateran* Council, which had made confession obligatory). Henceforth, faith rather than practical reason becomes key with regard to ethics. Conscience is no longer treated as part of the metaphysics of created personhood* but is integrated into the soteriological notion of sin* and grace*. For Luther, conscience is the site of a struggle between hopeless ethical and religious justification through law on the one hand and faith in the justifying word* of God on the other. When conscience is "terrified of the Law... rely only on grace and the word of comfort" (WA 40/1, 204). No longer naturally oriented toward God, but set in the context of Christ's liberating work, conscience really is a matter of faith: "faith born of this word will bring peace of conscience" (WA 1, 541). Conscience is not the center of moral judgment since faith acknowledges God's judgment about the person rather than conscience's judgments about the person's acts. Good conscience thus comes before doing good deeds and not the reverse. Moral and pastoral theology must thus move away from the formation of conscience or its instruction in religious observances to deal first and foremost with conversion* and trust. Calvin*, similarly, emphasizes that conscience is best understood in relation to salvation*; freed by Christ's gift (*Inst.* III, 19, 15), conscience need not heed anyone, even though externally it is due to civil obedience.

5. Modern Times

a) *Philosophy* Modern thinkers often read the Reformation as asserting the rights of individual conscience

over Church authority*. It is mistaking faith for subjectivity, as well as underestimating the objective character of classical Protestantism*. To turn Christianity into a religion of conscience (Holl), one needs a certain philosophy of modernity, in which authority is accorded to conscience as an autonomous faculty of self-governance, increasingly detached from rational consideration of moral reality. Montaigne describes it as a mean of self-knowledge ("I have my laws and my court to judge myself"; *Essais* III). Descartes* conceives conscience as affective rather than rational (*Passions de l'âme*). Spinoza understands it within the perspective of his ethics of self-preservation (*Ethica* IV). Conscience thus becomes the nucleus of personal decision around which orbit other realities (authoritative doctrines, public conventions) that furnish material for debate. Conscience is close to moral freedom seen as autonomy, whose concept entails that the essential condition of moral existence is the absence of determination by nature or society. Such affirmations find their political expression in the principle that "it is nothing but tyranny to wish to predominate over conscience" (Bayle), a principle that lies at the heart of liberal pluralism.

The English school of "moral sense" (the Earl of Shaftesbury [1671–1713], Francis Hutcheson [1694–1746], and Joseph Butler [1692–1752]) turns conscience into "a principle of reflection in men, by which they distinguish between, approve and disapprove, their own actions" (Butler). Against this, Hume (1711–76) argues that conscience is a matter of feeling and not reason (*A Treatise of Human Nature*), thereby distancing conscience from nature and giving his theory a distinctive voluntarist twist. In the German idealist tradition, Kant* and Hegel* bring conscience closer to subjectivity. For Kant, conscience, self-sufficient and subject to no guidance, is "moral judgment passing judgment upon itself" (*Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft*); that is, moral reason is judging itself. Rather differently, Hegel considers conscience as "formal subjectivity" (*Philosophie des Rechts*), a view that would deeply affect later philosophers, notably Heidegger* (*Sein und Zeit*) and Ricoeur (*Soi-même comme un autre*), for whom conscience is to accuse but a call to authenticity.

The influence of theories of the pathological genesis of conscience should also be noted. According to Nietzsche* (*Zur Genealogie der Moral*) and Freud*, conscience arises in the struggle between desire and external constraints and is no more than an arbitrary mechanism confronting the self. The conventional character of conscience has also been underlined by sociology, which views conscience as an internalization of social representations.

b) Theology. Post-Reformation Protestantism shifts the issue of conscience to subjectivity. Calvinists such as Perkins (1558–1602) or Ames (1576–1633) look for subjective certainty of salvation in conscience. It means a rigorous examination of one's behavior in light of the commandments casuistically interpreted. This moralism, quite different from the Reformers' insistence on the priority of divine acquittal, can also be found elsewhere, for example, in the writings of Jeremy Taylor (1613–67), who understands conscience as well as Christian living in a way that, although not quite Pelagian, emphasizes the role of will. These developments helped reinforce the individualist conception of conscience: since it had but a distant relation to the doctrine of salvation, conscience had to become a concern for the conformity of the person to him- or herself. This concern for personal authenticity had other roots also: idealist philosophy of consciousness, pietism*, and the rise of a religious notion of subjectivity, in which the moral self is the seat of divine presence. Thus, Schleiermacher* defines conscience out of God-consciousness of the community (*Der christlicher Glaub*) followed by liberal Protestantism (Biedermann, Gass, Schenkels). In the first half of the 20th century, a quite antithetical position was espoused by Bonhoeffer* (*Ethik*) and especially in Barth*'s protest (*Ethik*) against "the ethics of naturalist or idealist subjectivism" and his trust in the evidence of conscience. For Barth, conscience depends on our adoption by God; it is not a reality that we have because conscience is participation in God's knowledge of the redeemed, and its primary activity is not self-examination but prayer*, which corresponds to the almost miraculous rarity of its apparition.

Recent Catholic work on conscience has often abandoned the juridical tone of manual traditions of moral and pastoral theology in favor of personalist understandings of conscience. Vatican* II even gave official encouragement in its emphasis on freedom: "the gospel has a sacred reverence for the dignity of conscience and its freedom of choice" (*Gaudium et spes* 41). Post-Vatican II theologians, such as Auer, Fuchs, or Böckle, make conscience the center of moral existence, which is characterized by responsibility.

6. Systematic Issues

Formal and material issues are closely tied in theories of conscience. At the formal level, we may distinguish those accounts that begin with analysis of the agent from those that begin with consideration of the field within which the agent exists. The former seldom refer

to the theological categories, and philosophy or the social sciences are a favored ground for Christian anthropology. In the latter, by contrast, the process is essentially theology, and there is little concern with finding harmony between Christian and non-Christian anthropologies. On a material level, one can start with the experience of obligation and define personal existence in terms of constitutional human decisions and acts: conscience is then seen as freedom, will, or personal commitment, only secondarily related to authority, tradition*, or revelation*, which are construed heteronomously. By contrast, one can deem essential the instances external to the person and think that moral existence is determined by something other than itself: the others, society* and its organization, and, above all, God's creative and redemptive acts. Then it is faith, not consciousness, that prevails; moral reason is not introspection but discerning an objective order; tradition and authority shape rather than inhibit authenticity. On all these issues, the debate remains open.

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See also **Casuistry; Ethics; Ethical, Autonomy of**