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Conscience: Are We Talking Jello or Concrete?

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At a recent meeting, during which a number of distinguished speakers presented talks on subjects dealing with ethics, a presentation on "Conscience" was made. A phrase that was used to express the speaker's difficulty in grasping the meaning of "conscience" was: "conscience is like jello — it is a concept difficult to grab hold of." In reality, conscience is not too difficult a concept to grab hold of. It is not much like jello at all. It is not too difficult to grab hold of mainly because it is a concept well thought out over the centuries. Conscience has more the solidity of concrete than of jello.

Our current culture has made the understanding of conscience more confusing. If you listen to the societal voice of our time, you may hear a definition of conscience that is quite arbitrary. By arbitrary I mean determined by the individual subjectively. Such a voice might sound like this: "I don't see where what I am doing really hurts anyone. It doesn't bother my conscience so it must be ok." Or, "I believe this is ok for me; my conscience is clear. Why should anyone else tell me I am wrong?" Or, again, "I know a lot of good people who are doing this. I would not presume to judge them, so I figure it's ok for me to do, too." These approaches to the concept of conscience amount to what Germain Grisez calls "moral subjectivism."¹

Grisez says that "the subjectivist account of conscience is to some extent simply a rationalizing attempt to justify refusal to submit to moral norms." He does not stop here, though, but goes on to say that "subjectivism is also to some extent a mistaken theory which follows from certain confusions."² The first of these confusions concerns conscience as personal. The fact that your conscience can grasp a moral truth doesn't mean that that moral truth originated in your conscience. You, in fact, are not originating the truth but are only comprehending or discovering it. Your understanding, as it were, is personal but that which you understand is not.

A second confusion concerns the role of conscience in relation to two types of requirements. The first type concerns legal requirements. The second is that of moral principles. In regards to legal requirements, the conscience defends the personal dignity of the individual confronted with morally unacceptable legal requirements. It does so because it knows moral principles and can judge legal requirements in light of them. If, however, conscience is confronted by moral principles themselves, it is actually confronted by the source of its own authority. In this case, if the individual's conscience is in conflict with these moral principles, conscience is required to correct itself. It would be wrong to defend itself against the moral principles in the name of personal freedom.

Two Sources of Error

If our concept of conscience can be wrong, where do such errors come from? They often have two primary sources. They can arise from what is called the "super-ego" or from social convention. "Super-ego" refers to the subconscious source of an individual's sense of obligation and guilt. This is perceived on an emotional level and is usually formed in early childhood. When a child misbehaves he experiences an inner conflict which makes him feel bad. Over time, the demands of parents and others on whom he depends become internalized as an authority over (super) the conscious self (ego). Operating through imperfect people, the super-ego tends to be rigid, non-rational, sometimes oppressive and frequently irrelevant to what is truly good and bad for people.

Social convention is another powerful force affecting the concept of conscience. People often consider violations of social convention as wrong. Whereas the authority for the super-ego lies with parents, that of the social convention lies with the group. Identification with the group makes dealing with social convention an important consideration. However, since this force is made up of many different individuals, the interests of the group may not be consistent with what is truly good and bad.

The super-ego, then is not really moral at all. It offers no reason for acting aside from a "feeling". Behaviors that lead to acceptance are adopted by the child and the ones that lead to pain are avoided. The super-ego is also a force that compels one to act — to act in a way that avoids pain. And, super-ego also operates in reference to an external authority — it is another who defines acceptable behavior and compels it under penalty of loss or pain.

Social convention does offer reasons for acting beyond just non-rational determinants. But, these reasons may be rational only in reference to circumstances in that society. Choices may be morally indifferent, backed only by a social sanction. There is a compelling reason for adherence to convention, though, much like that of the compulsion of the super-ego. It is a sense of obligation to the group by which one abides or experiences the pain of being cut off from the group.

Moral truth is different from the super-ego and from social convention in

several ways. Moral truth is based on reasons which are fully intelligible, not just on the facts of life as offered by a society. Moral truth generates responsibility; one acts, not out of a compulsive acceptance of behaviors taught by a personal authority, nor from an obligation to fit in with societal convention, but because one is free to choose the moral as a matter of real human goodness and reasonableness. A person of mature conscience does not ask what is the minimum they can do or how far they can go. These express something of super-ego and social convention. A mature conscience seeks to determine the implications of faith for one's entire life: "What is the good and holy thing to do? What is the mind of Christ on this matter? How can I do God's will in my life?"

Obviously, the super-ego and social convention may contribute to the development of conscience, but they do not complete or mature it. And, there is overlap among super-ego, convention, and moral truth. But, we are interested in this final understanding of conscience, i.e., the ability to know moral truth.

The Church on Conscience

What is the Catholic Church's understanding of conscience? In Scripture the judgement of conscience is attributed to the "heart", which receives and retains God's law and which can be enlightened by His gift of wisdom. The work of conscience in Christian life is assigned to the renewed "mind." Conscience, which is joined to knowledge of moral norms written in the heart, serves the Gentile as the demand of the revealed law serves the Jew. Conscience is a source of warning helpful to the Christian. But it is not infallible. A "clear conscience" does not mean that one is justified.

Vatican II emphasizes the dignity of the conscience. This dignity is rooted in a law written in our hearts, a law we do not make, but discover. Although this law written in our hearts is made up of general principles, it has implications for particular moral issues. As used by Vatican II, conscience refers at once to awareness of principles of morality, to the process of reasoning from principles of morality, to the process of reasoning from principles to conclusions, and to the conclusions, which are moral judgements on choices made or under consideration. St. Thomas uses the word "synderesis" for awareness of principles and "practical reasoning" for the process of moving from principles to conclusions, and "conscience" for the concluding judgement only. According to St. Thomas, conscience is an intellectual act of judgement, one's last and best judgement concerning what one should choose. With this judgement in mind, one chooses, either in agreement with conscience or against it.

Grisez adds that even after one's choice is made conscience plays a role. Here, again, conscience is an act of knowledge, not to be confused with feelings of guilt or security. One compares the choice actually made with one's best judgement as to the choice one ought to have made. This is actually what is done when one "examines his conscience."

The teaching of Vatican II on conscience is found, essentially, in Chapter 16 of "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (GS 16). It deserves close reading. "In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of the law can when necessary speak to his heart more specifically: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God. To obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged."³ The Council goes on by quoting from Romans, chapter 2. "When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus."⁴

Here is the concept wherein conscience is a co-witness with the law. The two together will accuse or defend, implying that they must agree with each other. Vatican II continues this idea in its image of conscience as a voice of the law written by God in the heart. Heart includes the whole of one's interior life, including one's mind and will. All men know this law, for its demands are written in their hearts. Therefore, the Council points out, "In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals and from social relationships. Hence, the more that a correct conscience holds sway, the more persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and strive to be guided by objective norms or morality."⁵

Note that the Council speaks of "correct conscience." When correct, conscience demands that one be reasonable, not arbitrary; that one conform to objective or true norms, not to subjective norms chosen arbitrarily. The Council implies, of course, that conscience is not always correct. How might conscience be mistaken? God's law, written in our hearts, can be misapplied in one's judgement. Mistakes are possible in the formulating of principles, reasoning from them, and considering the facts involved in the possible choices which are to be morally evaluated.

Cumulative Moral Blindness

If the error is one's own fault, he is responsible for the wrong he does in following an erroneous conscience. Vatican II teaches that "conscience frequently errs from invincible ignorance without losing its dignity. The same cannot be said when someone cares but little for truth and goodness, and conscience by degrees grows practically sightless as a result of a practice of sinning." If someone does not avail himself of available means of knowing the truth, or the good, he is responsible for the wrong he does in following an erroneous conscience. If one sins frequently, he can become morally blind, little by little. Such a person is responsible for the wrong he

does. One's first responsibility is to form conscience rightly so that one's moral judgements will be true. In the document, "Dignitatis Humanae", we read, "Hence everyman has the duty, and therefore the right, to seek truth in matters religious, in order that he may with prudence form for himself right and true judgements of conscience with the use of all suitable means."⁶

The reality of evil is obscured by our present cultural morality making the truth more difficult to see. Even some who are responsible for keeping the truth clear may fail in their responsibility for many diverse reasons. This produces a dangerous situation. Pope John Paul II teaches: "Priests and deacons, when they have received timely and serious preparation for this apostolate, must unceasingly act towards families as fathers, brothers, pastors and teachers, assisting them with the means of grace and enlightening them with the light of truth. Their teaching and advice must therefore always be in full harmony with the authentic Magisterium of the Church, in such a way as to help the People of God to gain a correct sense of the faith, to be subsequently applied to practical life. Such fidelity to the Magisterium will also enable priests to make every effort to be united in their judgments, in order to avoid troubling the consciences of the faithful."⁷ In some areas of Church teaching, for example "Humanae Vitae", laypeople were frequently advised to follow their consciences regarding birth control. Here is a case where a poor understanding of conscience by those giving advice has really done a lot of damage. Normally, conscience becomes a subject of reflection when one is thinking about a past action. In forming one's conscience here and now, one pays attention to the relevant moral truth, not the conscience. People at this stage do not need a teaching on the concept of conscience. They need to know what is right and true.

The will to live a good life is the indispensable foundation of an upright conscience. In its submission to God's word, the act of living faith provides this foundation. But, on the level of knowledge, three things are needed to make a sound judgement of conscience: a clear understanding of norms; accurate and adequate information about possibilities; and, readiness to engage in moral reflection before every choice. This means we need a sure source of moral truth. The Scriptures and the Church provide such a source. We need specific instruction on practical possibilities. Catechesis provides this instruction. We also need spiritual direction, vocational guidance, and counselling as well as the practice of asking moral questions. Seeking this formation is essential.

Conclusions

Conscience, then, is awareness of moral truth. Common references to the super-ego, which gives a sense of requirement and guilt at the emotional level, and to awareness of social convention imposed by a group with which one identifies may have no direct relationship with moral truth. As Vatican II uses it, conscience refers to the awareness of moral principles, to the

process of reasoning from principles to conclusions, and to the conclusions themselves — moral judgements on choices already made or under consideration. St. Thomas' classic account focuses on conscience in this last aspect, i.e., as an intellectual act of judgement.

Judgements of conscience can be mistaken. Thus, one's first responsibility is to form conscience rightly so that one's moral judgements will be true. Rationalization and self-deception can, however, produce a conscience which is voluntarily fixed in error, or, as Vatican II says, a conscience "practically sightless as a result of a practice of sinning."

For the Christian, indeed, for all mankind, the formation of conscience is critical. The happiness of the individual is dependent upon living a moral life; so is the happiness of society. Proper formation has the consistency of concrete — something you can build a moral life on . . . it is not jello.

References

1. Grisez, G.: *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, vol. 1, Christian Moral Principles, chapter 3. Franciscan Herald Press, 1983.
2. Ibid.
3. *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* GS 16.
4. Romans 2:14-16 NAB.
5. GS 16.
6. *Declaration on Religious Liberty* DH 3.
7. *Familiaris Consortio*, John Paul II.