Christian Conscience
“This above all: to thine own self be true” [leave quote here or only on inside title page?]

13 May 9.15am 33,861 words approx.

Foreword - Martin Laverty
Christian Conscience
“This above all: to thine own self be true”
William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet*

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Preface

Having been appointed the Catholic Health Australia 2008 Scholar in Residence, I was given the opportunity to study conscience in depth and write on it for those working in the healthcare sector – nurses, physicians, allied health professionals and pastoral care practitioners. In Catholic Healthcare in Australia the majority are Christians. I hope this small book will be of benefit to Christian and Catholic lay healthcare professionals and other professionals, e.g., teachers, scientists, etc., in their daily work and lives since they all have a conscience. I trust it will not prove to be too difficult for my readers.

Great sacrifices are made by people who live according to their conscience. Throughout the centuries people have died rather than to act against their conscience – think of the martyrs for the Christian faith or Marxists who have died for their conscientious convictions. Such people were prepared to die rather than to live deprived of the freedom to act in accordance with their conscience.

I start with the restrictions imposed by the recent Victorian Abortion Law Reform Act to the right of healthcare professionals to follow their conscience in some situations regarding abortion. This serves as a clarion call to consider the importance of conscience for doctors, nurses, allied health professionals, indeed for all professionals, and when necessary to defend the moral rights of conscience.

In Part One I present my own reflections on the nature and meaning of conscience, how we arrive at judgments of conscience, the moral principles of conscience, especially in relation to an erroneous and a doubtful conscience. I give my own practical exposition of conscience for lay people, with an eye to applications for healthcare professionals involved in hospitals, nursing homes and aged care facilities. I soon became convinced of the need to follow up with an explanation of the basic ideas employed in morality and ethics, including the concept of the human person since conscience is always the conscience of a person. Finally I draw on some enlightening psychological aspects of conscience and its functioning from Sidney Callahan’s work.
In Part Two, I explore the meanings and usage of the term *conscience* and its moral principles in the Tradition. I begin with the term used by the ancient Greeks and how their term for conscience made its entry into the New Testament, especially the Letters of St Paul, the champion of conscience. A study is then made of the use of the term conscience and its related moral principles in the writings of St Thomas Aquinas, Cardinal Newman, the Second Vatican Council, Papal teachings and Catholic scholars.

I much appreciated the support and advice of Therese Vassarotti and Patrick McArdle, of Catholic Health Australia in finalising the text of this work. I am also grateful to John Begley SJ for his comments on an earlier draft of this book. Finally I thank Dr Francis Moloney SDB, LSS and Fr. Anthony Dean CM, LSS for their help in finalising the section on “Conscience in Greek and New Testament Writings”

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A law enacted, by the Parliament of Victoria in 2008 has done precisely this. If a doctor is asked by a pregnant woman to perform an abortion and the doctor has a conscientious objection to doing this, the recently enacted Victorian Abortion Law Reform Act requires that the doctor “must refer the woman to another registered health practitioner in the same regulated health profession who the practitioner knows does not have a conscientious objection to abortion.”2 Obviously this stipulation is not morally binding on any doctor. It was cynical for Parliamentarians to enjoy a conscience vote on a law legalising abortion but to deny it to any doctors with a conscientious objection to referring a woman to another medical practitioner for an abortion. There is no great inconvenience involved for a pregnant woman to access pregnancy counselling or abortion advisory services: it only requires consulting the public phone book. The limitation of conscientious objection in this law is unwarranted and it represents the first appearance of a totalitarian streak in an Australian government by unjustifiably denying the right of conscientious objection to medical practitioners.

Bernard Dickens has recently written: “Refusal not only to perform abortion or related procedures but refusal to refer patients to other practitioners accessible to patients who do not object is ethically unacceptable, because it denies patients the information and care to which they are entitled.”3 I agree that patients should be told accurate and true information about any medical treatment and care they need, including, for example, accurate scientific information on the mode of action of different post-coital drugs to prevent conception after rape. But this does not imply that a doctor is ethically obliged to directly terminate the life of an unborn child. Nor does it imply that the doctor should show approval for any such killing by referring the patient to another doctor who has no conscientious objection to terminating a pregnancy. Abortion may be legal in many countries, but this does not make it ethical to kill innocent and harmless unborn children. I do not understand how a request for an abortion generates an ethical obligation for the doctor to refer the pregnant to another doctor for a termination of pregnancy with its inevitable killing of an innocent human fetus. The truth of the matter is clear and should be told. Surprisingly enough Dickens earlier in his article had approvingly quoted Pope John Paul II saying it was necessary “that each individual's conscience be respected by everyone else; people must not attempt to impose their own ‘truth’ on others.”4

I cannot but agree with Bernard Häring’s views: “The state may not permit its protection of individual freedom to be turned against its own existence and wellbeing. Nor can those who abuse the exalted prerequisites of tranquil coexistence for the very purpose of suppressing every freedom of faith appeal to the honesty and sincerity of their conscience as just defence of their actions. The state must restrain their subversion as it restrains mayhem or murder.”5

2. Meaning and nature of conscience
Conscience is important on account of its close ties to truth from which it derives its moral authority.6 Those who have no regard for moral truth are not excessively concerned about

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4 Pope John Paul II, Message for the 24th World Day of Peace 1991, para. 4
6 Much of this section is inspired by an earlier piece of mine:”True to Conscience and Self”, Live out the Truth in Love, Melbourne: Catholic Education Office, 1985, 48-61- now out of print.
following their conscience. Study and reflection on conscience is all the more necessary at a time when confusion exists about its interpretation and its rights, especially when some people expect the community and the law to respect the conscientious choices of all and sundry.

**Objective morality** is concerned with what is truly morally right or morally wrong. It deals with the domain of objective moral truths. Conscience, on the other hand, belongs to the domain of subjective morality where a person sincerely seeks to find out the morality of an action about to be performed. Subjective morality includes conscience with whatever a moral agent sincerely believes here and now to be good or not good, i.e. bad. Morality and moral truth, then, may be approached subjectively as well as objectively. In Part One I will be dealing with issues related to the meaning of conscience and its moral principles in theory and in practice.

Conscience, strictly speaking, is a sincere act of one’s intellect or reason making a final judgement on the morality of a concrete proposal, here and now. It is the task of practical reasoning to come to conscientious convictions in concrete cases, in the light of the first moral principles habitually present by nature in the intellect and known as synderesis. Conscience looks to synderesis, for basic moral principles to apply as required in ordinary daily life. Walter Farrell, referring to synderesis and conscience aptly says; “the first is no more than the habit by which we hold to first practical principles; the second is merely a practical judgment of the intellect as to what is to be done or avoided, what is right or wrong.”

These moral principles are not externally imposed, but rather express what persons ought to do to be true to themselves and others as responsible moral agents. Delhaye makes the same point that “(Synderesis) cannot be wrong, nor can it sin. It cannot be wrong because it proceeds intuitively and perceives the evidence of the first principles of the moral order…. It is a first principle as it were in which every practical judgement originates. If it is not stable or firm, no moral life would be possible.”

Kevin Kelly sums it up well: “This basic prime principle, ‘good must be done and evil must be avoided’ is merely the formulation of this fundamental inclination to seek his own perfection. Man still has to particularize the ‘good’ and the ‘evil’ involved in this principle. In other words, man has to discover what actions are compatible with his human nature and what actions are denials of it. Certain things will appear immediately obvious; these are normally called the ‘prime principles’ and are said to be included in the habit of synderesis. This is, therefore, a quasi-innate habit which is in every man and which is, in itself, infallible.”

Clearly, what is presupposed is the first and most general of all moral principles known intuitively by us, namely, that only good must be done and evil avoided, or better put in personalist terms *I must only do good and avoid evil*. This expression of the principle would be known from our earliest experiences. It functions as a purely formal principle in our practical reason. What is central is the notion of good employed by any person who is self-aware. Its meaning is related to the subject, the person concerned, signifying good for the self as person and ultimately other persons. Implicitly good is understood as what can satisfy, and not frustrate, one’s basic natural inclinations and needs. Our practical intellect has such an intuitive understanding of the self that it acts as the initial judge or criterion

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of what general kinds of action are compatible with, i.e., not contrary to our basic natural
inclinations and needs. The first moral principle is do only good and avoid what is not
good, bad or evil. Hence synderesis would naturally be opposed to killing non-threatening
innocent human beings, adultery, and support marital fidelity and protection of our
neighbour’s property. We cannot but always want the realisation of our basic natural
inclinations in the pursuit of true happiness. All this is nothing but the habitual formal
function of synderesis with the obligatory warning to do only good and avoid what is not
good.

D’Arcy would be in basic agreement with the above explanations when he says:
“Morality is discovered by man’s reason in reflection on his natural inclinations, given
him by God as creator of human nature.”

D’Arcy rightly adds:

“In so far as it is natural, it describes those types of action which will in fact fulfil, ‘actualise’, the real, though yet unfulfilled, potentialities of
human nature.”

Conscience is ever on the look-out and applies this first principles habitually present in
synderesis as its criterion in ordinary daily life. It is experience provides that content, the
material, the contents that are concretely judged good or bad for each moral agent. This
appears to be the rationale underlying our experience of the moral and imperative
contained in all moral norms, formal and material. The literal meaning of the original
ancient Greek word for conscience, syneidêsis (συνείδησις), which means a “joint
looking”, “looking together”, a “knowing with” or “co-knowing”. Our conscience
looks at a proposed action and looks to the self’s good by means of the first principles
of synderesis. We look at, say, the notion of forging a cheque and look to synderesis to
see if it conflicts with the self’s good – a joint looking at the proposed deed and the
good for oneself known through the first principles of synderesis. Conscience hereby
looks both ways, compares and morally assesses before making its judgement: do not
forge a cheque!

The judgement of conscience can command, permit or forbid an action to be done.
Persons are free to choose to do something morally good or something morally
better. We are not bound to choose the morally better, or even the best option,
unless this would involve moral evil on some other score, such as failing in a duty
of love.

We are not bound to choose every good possible, but we are definitely
bound to avoid choosing what we know is morally bad, even if it is closely related
to some other good purpose we are bent on achieving.

Usually the judgement of conscience concerns a proposed action here and now, but it
can also refer to a deed done in the past. Further on I shall discuss conscience in
relation to past actions. Strictly speaking, my conscience cannot tell another person
what he or she should do or avoid. As Selwyn Grave explains: “My conscience
cannot deliver judgements of any kind on the conduct of others … I can pass these

In reference to the first principles of natural law, D’Arcy rightly adds: “In so far as it is natural, it describes
those types of action which will in fact fulfil, ‘actualise’, the real, though yet unfulfilled, potentialities of
human nature.”, D’Arcy, 128.
12 D’Arcy, Conscience and its Right to Freedom, 60.
judgements of course on the conduct of others; the conceptually circumscribed ‘part’ of myself which is my conscience cannot.”

To be successful in this moral enterprise, we need to be adept in handling objective moral principles to make right practical judgments time and time again. Aristotle referred to this moral skill as practical wisdom (φρόνησις). Aquinas spoke of *prudentia*, which is a virtue and roughly translated as prudence or right judgment.

This is the meaning I have in mind when I employ it in this small book. Eric Mount puts it well: “Conscience (as *synteresis*) urges the demand that the good be done, and prudence discerns how the command is to be obeyed concretely. Conscience furnishes the compulsion; prudence supplies the content. Conscience makes prudential judgment imperative….Where conscience is prudent, the two are the same.”

Smith says much the same: “As synderesis provides intuitively known and logically necessary foundational principles out of which moral decisions are made, and as conscience is the act of applying those principles to particular cases, prudence provides the skill, the direction and the command to move conscience to action. Since the process of deliberating and acting is complex and difficult, it needs the help of prudence to brings it to actualization.”

Conscience is not outside us; nor is it something within us distinct from our rational nature and ourselves in action. Conscience represents the whole person. Mount goes even further: “Man does not have a conscience…. He is a conscience.” It is not literally the ‘voice of God’ that we hear. It is our reason at work on a moral issue that claims our attention here and now. It is an act of our intellect reflecting on, and then, judging that a concrete proposal of action be done or avoided here and now. We are morally bound by a certain judgment of conscience precisely because we believe it to be true. We have to follow our conscience because we have no moral option about being true to our own selves by doing good and avoiding evil. This is necessary, regardless of any other loss, be it financial, social or recreational. The dictate of conscience is a summons served on a person’s freewill and it involves a categorical and unconditional imperative to perform or omit a concrete action because it is believed this sincere judgement is good and absolutely needs to be obeyed to be true to oneself and one’s dignity. Judgments of conscience express moral truths that refer to goods for oneself and/or for others.

The function of conscience should not be understood as some form of choosing, deciding or wanting. It tells the moral truth for a concrete action as one sees it and not as one would like it to be. Conscience does not make any decisions: it is quite misleading to speak of acts of conscience as decisions. This would give the impression that conscience decides in much the same way as one decides to go for a walk or to do an assignment for one’s nursing degree. The judgment of conscience is no more a decision than the judgment that two plus two is four. An act of conscience is not an act of choice, but an act of the intellect judging the moral truth of a proposed action here and now. Choice should play no part in a judgment of conscience. However, a moral agent can always accept or reject the moral imperative of conscience dictated to one’s free will. Put simply, conscience may tell me what to do, but I can choose to

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17 Mount, Eric, Jr., *Conscience and Responsibility*, 34
reject the verdict of conscience. Choice is the prerogative of free will, not of conscience: the two must not be confused in times when autonomy has become an idol.

**Making judgments of conscience**

**Deductive reasoning**

At times we use deductive reasoning to come to a particular moral conclusion in practical life, and this is very easily done, either explicitly or implicitly. It could happen something like this. We could already accept the premise that it is immoral to kill an innocent human being. Next, we would soon realise that giving an extremely high dose of morphine to a patient suffering from distress, but not dying, and who had not been previously taking morphine, could possibly be lethal. If the patient did die soon after the high dose had been deliberately given, it would soon be intuitively deduced that the action may have been the moral equivalent of murder or manslaughter. Conscience would be well prepared the next time to ban a repetition of the same high dose in similar circumstances. The deductive process works in a similar way in other situations. In these cases there is no doubt about the truth of the moral principle employed as a premise for a rapid deductive process.

**Inductive reasoning**

Inductive comparison and reasoning are required in new, especially complex moral cases. Life often presents complex situations that, at first seem difficult and require the best use of our practical moral skills. Circumstances have to be considered. It is a good thing for a married couple to express their love through marital acts in their bedroom, but doing the same in a crowded public park is not good; the circumstance of performing marital acts in public changes what otherwise would be a good act into a bad action. Again it is one thing for a rich person to be charitable and to give money to the poor but quite another if a rich person does the same in order to persuade the poor to vote for a personal friend, and a dishonest one at that. Linda Hogan gives a timely warning that conscience “recognizes that intentions and circumstances are morally relevant, it attends to the particularities of each situation and rejects views of morality that evaluates acts in isolation from the contexts in which they are performed.”

In health care the focus on the context and clinical encounter is of vital significance.

There are various moral principles, and on any particular occasion, more than one may come to mind competing for attention. The prudent person is one who has good will, means well and is intent on achieving only good ends. To do this effectively one needs to have a good grasp of what is involved in situations as they occur, their likely impact on oneself and others, as well as their overall consequences in doing or omitting them. Not all moral principles are relevant or applicable to any given situation beyond the one requiring us to avoid doing moral evil. Granted this, there is scope for prudent evaluation after having realistically summed up what is involved in any one situation.

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In each case it is necessary to be sufficiently alert to discover which moral principle is relevant and binding here and now. Will it be avoid injuring my neighbour or taking precautions for legitimate self-defence; avoid taking another's goods or taking from another whatever is necessary to save a life; maintain a professional confidence or disclose to the authorities whatever information is required to safeguard the common good; attend a dying patient or celebrate a silver jubilee wedding anniversary; tell the truth to the police or pretend not to know anything in order to help an innocent person avoid unjust arrest; keep an arranged meeting with one’s parents or accept an invitation to go out with one’s friends. In these cases the right course of action can only be found out on the spot, after a prudent evaluation to determine which of the possible moral principles is applicable and binding in the case at hand. An assessment has to be made of the harmful effects involved in each case by the available alternative courses of action. This is how a conscientious person should go about coming to a sound final judgment in daily life.

Quite different is the situation where the choice is between adultery with a male prison guard with the intention of becoming pregnant and thereby being guaranteed release from prison or remaining in prison; denying one's faith in Christ or risking one's life; breaking the sacramental seal of confession or risking imprisonment; directly intending to kill a threatening armed man who refuses to drop his weapon or run the risk of him killing a dozen innocent bystanders in a rampage. In these cases one of the alternatives clearly involves moral evil and therefore is not a moral option. No good or honourable end or purpose justifies doing a morally bad act.

The case is different again when the Principle of Double Effect is legitimately applied where one permits a serious harmful side-effect for proportionately grave reasons. A case in point would be for a surgeon to remove a life-threatening malignant cancerous uterus to save the mother’s life and thereby regretfully accepts the inevitable, but unwanted, loss of life of an unborn child as a side-effect. However one may not directly intend to surgically terminate the life of the unborn child, e.g. by dismemberment – not even for a good therapeutic purpose. This would be direct abortion, which is excluded as a moral option. In a case of rape one may attempt to prevent conception occurring, but not to terminate the life of the human embryo conceived as a result of rape. Still, it could happen that errors of conscience may be made by choosing to do an objectively immoral act due to the influence of distress or panic, say, by the use of an abortifacient drug to prevent implantation after rape.

Not all cases of the application of the Principle of Double Effect are as simple as the classic cases quoted above. This is evidenced by the long debate over decades about the morality of possessing nuclear arms as a deterrent in an overall strategy for peace. One could only imagine the problems of conscience of executive heads of governments contemplating whether to resort to the use of nuclear weapons, and under what conditions, if ever, this could possibly be moral. One would need to be morally certain that the intended benefits would outweigh the expected, but unwanted harmful side-effects of the use of nuclear weapons. This is precisely why the morality of the use of nuclear arms to bring peace, or even held as a deterrent to maintain peace, is seriously questioned. Nobody questions the right of

self-defence. What seems to be apparent is that the possible benefits of the use of nuclear weapons could not conceivably outweigh the loss of innocent lives resulting from the destruction of most of the suburbs of a large city by a nuclear bomb. Pope John Paul II also thought long about this before he made a judgement of conscience to give his carefully pondered and prudent answer to the morality of possessing nuclear weapons as a deterrent in a Message delivered to the General Assembly of the United Nations on 7 June 1982:

In current conditions "deterrence" based on balance, certainly not as an end in itself but as a step on the way toward a progressive disarmament, may still be judged morally acceptable. Nonetheless in order to ensure peace, it is indispensable not to be satisfied with this minimum which is always susceptible to the real danger of explosion.20

Consider also the problems created by the global financial crisis, the impact of the use of contemporary industrial technology on unemployment, the implications of privacy in relation to the delivery of medical care for patients a long way from home, and a host of other moral problems in the area of bioethics: preserve the economy of one’s own country or try to prop up the economies of poorer countries; in vitro fertilisation, embryo freezing, destructive human embryo experimentation for therapeutic purposes, the cloning of human embryos for destructive therapeutic research, the use of donor gametes, surrogacy, possible links of prenatal diagnostic tests to induced abortion, behaviour modifying drugs or the disproportionate use of some life-support treatments. These and other complex issues will not go away. The risk and the challenge of a person’s conscience and sense of responsibility are as pressing today as ever. To facilitate making a correct judgment of conscience in complex cases, prudent inductive reasoning should be employed, using all the resources of scientific, medical, legal and ethical disciplines, as required, to come to a certain moral conclusion or at least a credible conclusion based on evidence and solid rational arguments.

**Formation of conscience**

The moral scenarios outlined above highlight the necessity of providing, and the need of taking advantage of, moral formation in-service opportunities for interested professionals from many sectors -- health, medical, nursing, business, police, armed forces, the various sectors of education and others as well. It is incumbent on all professionals to ensure they receive the ethical and moral formation they need to practise their own profession adequately since they all have to make ethical and/or moral judgments as part of their work. What was learnt at school would no longer be sufficient for professional persons: they owe it to those they serve to do something about it. More is achieved by inner persuasion than by moral norms learnt off by rote memory as school children.

People have to learn the basic moral principles required for responsible moral living and the making of ethical and/or moral judgements of conscience in their daily lives, especially persons in positions of responsibility and leadership. It is no longer realistic to expect all in our contemporary world to look to the classic moral textbooks written by moral theologians or ethicists. Life is moving too swiftly to await the writing of new text books with undisputed answers. The tempo

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20 Vatican website: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/index.htm
of modern life thrusts the onus of making decisions more and more on health professionals and others with little warning.

It is worthwhile recalling that the Church and clergy should not be asked to give concrete solutions to all the moral problems that arise in the lives of lay Christians, i.e. those who are not ordained ministers. The Second Vatican Council was quite explicit on this point when speaking about the role of lay people:

"It is their task to cultivate a properly informed conscience and to impress the divine law on the affairs of the earthly city. For guidance and spiritual strength let them turn to the clergy; but let them realize that their pastors will not always be so expert as to have a ready (the Latin text adds concretam, concrete) answer to every problem (even every grave problem) that arises; this is not the role of the clergy; it is rather up to the lay persons to shoulder their responsibilities under the guidance of Christian wisdom and with eager attention to the teaching authority of the Church."  

The provision of education in the relevant moral principles would enable professional persons to discern which is the relevant principle to use to make the right judgment of conscience in complex cases arising in their personal, family, social and professional lives. All this should be done in the light of the truths of the moral law and a thorough grasp of the complexity of each case. People may need short or longer in-service sessions on basic moral principles adapted to their specific personal and work-related needs, including issues touching on conscience, to give them more confidence in making right moral judgments.

**Practical factors influencing conscience**

Our intellect examines an action that confronts us or that we choose to concentrate on. We are capable, both consciously and sub-consciously, to direct our focus away from enquiring into pathways that we foresee might disturb our complacent status quo. An ingrained reluctance to change as a result of coming across a disturbing moral challenge could subtly influence our free will to choose to focus on something more appealing and less worrying. It would be extremely difficult and dangerous to attempt to draw the fine line that divides the consciences of those who err in good faith and those who err as a result of prejudice or simply reluctance to examine closely all the relevant factors. We would need to be cautious before claiming that our conscience is always in good faith on moral issues where our own interests are at stake.

Similar comments apply to cases where one's greed, ambition, self-indulgence, pride or passions are involved. These may be classed as non-theoretical factors that may sometimes unduly influence our conscience. Other non-theoretical factors include feelings, emotions, desires, our early education and culture and also sub-conscious influences. A habit may also influence us to do something without thinking, e.g., to use a swear word. The sincerity of a true conscience needs to be tested in the crucible of fire. A religious faith can influence judgements of conscience, e.g. a Catholic or an Islamic faith. One’s faith may be strong or weak – and there are degrees of this. One who was educated as a Catholic at a Catholic primary school but found no faith support within the family at all would probably have a weak faith. It is likely that judgements of conscience of such a person as a late teenager or an adult would not be influenced very much by the Catholic faith whereas one who had a strong faith nourished frequently by prayer would most likely be influenced to make judgements of conscience in the light of Catholic teaching on moral

21 “Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World”, *Gaudium et Spes*, Second Vatican Council, n.43 and also n.33.
issues. We need to be aware that many Catholics do have weak faith and to be careful before concluding that they act with insincere or culpably erroneous consciences.

The role of the intellect is important, but this does not exclude our feelings from influencing our conscience. Feelings often first enable us to recognise the presence of ideas and moral values, thereby bestirring conscience itself. We should not under-rate the cognitive importance of human feeling which may well be regarded as the fore-runner of ideas. Indeed, an idea may even be regarded as human feeling’s sublimation, its improvement and its completion. When a newly formed idea eventually emerges from the last traces of feeling, it does not sign the death warrant of feeling, but is itself the feeling arisen anew. As William Ernest Hocking wrote years ago: “Cognizance and feeling are but different stages of the same thing.” And again, he put it this way: “Feeling has been an anticipatory thought, a fact throughout of the same nature. … This pragmatic equivalence is a confirmation of the substantial sameness of ideas and feeling; of the destiny of feeling to find itself in idea.” I think it is universally experienced that many of our moral evaluations of newly proposed actions begin in our feelings, when we start with “gut-feeling” evaluations, many of which in time are confirmed intellectually in moral judgements of conscience. While feelings are not definitive for moral evaluation, and may at times unduly influence our judgements of conscience, especially if our emotions run high, they should not be routinely dismissed out of hand as useless.

One who is ill, nervous or depressed due to some set-back in life, or living under stress and strain arising from work or family situations, needs careful consideration. Such a person could do some wrong that is completely out of character. To all appearances he or she could be acting with full knowledge and free consent but in fact could be inhibited. Moral responsibility could be somewhat diminished in many such cases. This is not said to condone immoral actions, but to help one’s conscience make a true assessment of whatever occurs. People who find themselves in a dire situation like this might be better off seeking professional help or even taking a holiday—providing their financial state is not the cause of their anxiety or erratic behaviour.

Professor David Kissane has written about demoralisation, a condition that may at times be quite distinct from depression in the case of patients nearing the end of their lives. He argues that for some people “demoralisation can cause a temporary breakdown of a person’s ‘assumptive world’ and thus interfere with their usual capacity to exercise choice.” Clearly patients diagnosed with demoralisation who subsequently appear to freely make decisions to end their lives would in fact most likely lack competence and could not be regarded moral agents. In these cases apparent decisions of conscience should have no moral or legal validity.

Types of conscience

A correct conscience is said to be one that is objectively true, whereas an erroneous conscience is one that is false. An erroneous conscience is said to be inculpable or blameless if the error cannot be corrected because one is unaware of

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23 Hocking, 70-72.
being in error at the time. We have all been in situations where we eventually have changed our sincere conscientious judgments about some kinds of action, admitting to ourselves that previously as teenagers we were at times in error. Just as we make mistakes in other areas of concern, we do the same in the moral sphere. A conscience is culpably erroneous when one reasonably could, and should, have taken the necessary steps to correct a suspected error of judgment, but failed to do so.

Gerald Gleeson identifies some possible causes of an erroneous conscience: “lack of respect for other people as counting equally with myself; erroneous fundamental moral beliefs and principles, and/or failure to reason rightly on the basis of these principles; disordered desires, prejudices, and blindness to the truth; failure to attend to all the facts and circumstances of a situation; hasty or careless deliberation among alternatives; the absence if good teachers, mentors and traditions, and the limitations of one’s culture generally, and so on. In short, it is obvious that I may be more or less responsible for my erring conscience, even when I am sincere.”

A conscience is said to be certain when a person’s judgment of conscience is believed to be true without any reasonable fear of error. It is important to note that here we are not referring to logical, mathematical or strictly scientific certitude. Thomas Gilby’s remarks are pertinent: “Certitude is not the same for all matters, and it is the mark of an educated man, says Aristotle, only to expect that amount of exactness which the nature of the particular subject admits.” What is required for conscience to bind, and suffices, is, as Gilby says, “proven sureness probablis certitude, should be present.” Morality is about human activity, and must perforse settle for moral certitude, i.e. human prudential certitude. We are referring to the certitude that a reasonable financier would require before making a large investment of money in a new project. Prudential or credible certitude cannot rule out the theoretical possibility of error, e.g. crossing a road when one has miscalculated the speed of an oncoming car. One can be certain of something without claiming infallibility for oneself. Indeed, it is possible for one to have a certain judgment of conscience which at the same time is also erroneous. This sober truth suggests we be always cautious: seeking moral truth is paramount. Indeed, again Gerard Gleeson rightly says: “the responsibility to form my conscience is more fundamental than the responsibility to follow my conscience.”

A conscience is said to be doubtful if one is unable to make a moral judgment about a concrete proposal, or if one is not sure about the judgment that one has made. One who is in the state of a doubtful conscience is always aware of it. A doubtful conscience should not be confused with a scrupulous conscience where one believes oneself to be in a state of doubt without any reasonable grounds for it, or one is afraid to apply to oneself in practice what one believes to be true, or one who habitually exaggerates the importance of minor issues. The cause of such states may be more a temporary psychological set-back of the persons afflicted.

27 Aquinas, Thomas, Summa Theologiae, ed. Thomas Gilby, Appendix 15, 183
than any error of strict theoretical moral evaluation. Scrupulous persons often benefit more from psychological therapy, counselling, or even a holiday, than prolonged theoretical moral discussions. One with a lax conscience tends to deem something to be morally permissible which in reality is immoral, and something which is gravely wrong to be simply a minor wrong.

**Moral principles of conscience**

Moral principles of conscience concern duties involved in acting in accordance with conscience itself, especially a certain conscience. At times we find ourselves in situations of moral doubt, unsure if what we are about to do is morally right or wrong. Moral philosophers and moral theologians in particular have agreed on a few moral principles for guidance for such cases.

**A Certain conscience must be obeyed**

The basic insight of conscience is that we must always act with a good conscience, i.e. in good faith. This implies that we should not act if we believe the course of action we are about to take is morally bad. A person who always acts unaware of doing any moral evil is acting in accord with conscience, and consequently lives a blameless life. The only assumption made here is that we are dealing with a genuine and uncorrupted conscience, not the conscience of criminal types for whom some objective bad actions do not appear as bad for them. Hence the *first moral principle* is that *we should always obey a certain conscience*. Its directives are certain, unambiguous and unconditioned. This principle is easy to understand in the light of the above explanation on the fundamental meaning of conscience as a categorical imperative to be true to ourselves in action.

This principle also applies to a certain conscience that happens to be *inculpably erroneous*. This is easy to understand when we reflect that a person with a certain conscience believes that his or her judgment is objectively true. The moral obligation arises precisely from this belief that one’s conscience is true or right. Hence, subjectively speaking, conscience is the supreme criterion of morality. This is the only light a person has for guidance for acting at the time. One who follows a certain but erroneous conscience will be without moral blame at the subjective level, even though, objectively, what is done might be bad. One's action pursues what one believes to be a truly objective moral good, even though in point of fact it is not.

Although one who follows an erroneous conscience in good faith believes that an action is in accord with objective moral truth, the community which believes otherwise would deny that it was in accord with objective moral truth. This shows the inbuilt orientation of language towards objective truth; this enables language used responsibly to serve the social needs of communication among members of the community. The indicative mood is used to make statements of universal moral principles because we believe that they are true. This is so because it belongs to the nature of the intellect to know its own natural capacity to conform to objective reality itself. Indeed, conscience does give us assurance that we are in contact with the real world, the world of truth, and not fantasy. If this were not the case, we would not continue making true statements to others who recognise them
as true and respond accordingly. We cannot be indifferent to the way we speak about objective moral truths in ordinary daily life. It is not surprising, then, that we do argue about moral truths when differences arise.

We say that a person who follows a certain, but erroneous conscience, performs a morally blameless action in the personal or subjective domain of conscience. But this does not imply that it would be objectively good for another person to do the same kind of action in the same circumstances. A deed performed by one with a sincere and certain, but erroneous, conscience cannot be held up as a morally good deed for all to imitate. An erroneous conscience should not be portrayed as a model for others, and much less as an example of authentic teaching of the Catholic Church. The logic of moral thinking and discourse shows that the requirements of a good conscience reveal that conscience, in the last analysis, is subordinate to the claims of objective moral truths on the integral good of persons. Conscience is far removed from relativism that dismisses universal moral truths. Conscience is only sincere if it constantly strives to discover objective truths concerning what is good for persons. As we shall see, Aquinas refraining from saying what is done by an erroneous conscience is an objectively good action, even if it is without blame. I suspect that for Aquinas the term ‘good’ has an inbuilt objective meaning whereby it would be inappropriate, and possibly misleading to talk of adultery done with a sincere erroneous conscience as objectively ‘good’. All the same, we need to admit that those who follow an erroneous conscience in good faith and without moral blame could still cause harm to themselves and to others.

Do not act with a conscience in a practical doubt

At times there may reasonable grounds for us to suspect what we are about to do may be morally bad. The second moral principle then becomes relevant and refers to a doubtful conscience. We should not proceed to act when our conscience has a doubt about the morality of a concrete action, i.e. do not act with a conscience in a practical doubt. We must resolve the practical doubt before proceeding to perform the action. If we are prepared to go ahead and act regardless of the practical doubt, it is a sign we are prepared to embrace the possible malice of the doubtful action. We should never act with such a practical doubt. In some cases it will be necessary to think matters over, to do some research or to seek advice from some trusted and prudent person(s), possibly expert in the area concerned. A hunter may not shoot if there are reasonable grounds to believe that the target behind a bush may be a human being instead of a deer – this is a practical doubt. Alternatively, the doubt may refer to the method to employ to prevent pregnancy after rape. It is certain the objective is morally good, but a doubt may arise whether the drug one has prevents pregnancy by suppressing ovulation, preventing fertilisation or by preventing an embryo from implanting in the uterus. Both these practical doubts need to be resolved before proceeding, first by using the direct way of finding out. The hunter can shout to find out and act accordingly, even if the deer escapes to live another day. As regards the mode of action of the drug to prevent pregnancy, the evidenced based views of national or international experts need to be obtained by, say, a literature search. What really counts is the validity of the most reliable scientific evidence available. These are two examples of solving a practical doubt of conscience by the direct way, thereby clearing the way to proceed with a good conscience. If the direct way fails to give an answer
one could have to recourse to the so-called indirect way of resolving a practical doubt.

**Indirect ways to resolve practical doubts of conscience.**

Morally safer course

There is one simple solution for the dilemma. One could always opt for the morally safer course of action. In other words, one could choose to adopt a course of action that avoids the risk of doing an immoral act. Certainly, if the inconvenience involved is negligible by adopting this course of action, one should opt for this solution. One would be bound to adopt the morally safer course when the doubt did not concern the need, say, of surgery for malignant cancer, but the suitability or effectiveness of the means used to fulfil this need. Suppose a surgeon has to perform a routine, but medically necessary operation, to save the life of a patient by removing an appendix or a malignant cancerous growth. The surgeon would be bound to choose the safe, well tried and tested procedure for the operation, rather than to experiment on a human patient with a quicker, but doubtfully effective new technique. Again, a chef in a hospital or a cook at a school camp would be morally bound to use food that is not contaminated, rather than use some doubtfully contaminated food found in the pantry for the sake of saving on costs. While it may be doubtful if the tinned food is contaminated, it is certain that a cook may not serve up doubtfully contaminated food. Even at the risk of serious inconvenience or expense, one must always choose the morally safer course when it is a matter of preserving the life or the health of patients or others, preventing any form of injustice to persons, harm to the community, or the violation of others' rights.

Doubtful theoretical moral obligations do not bind

Moralists the world over are sharply divided on some important moral problems that affect persons' private and/or public lives. This is not a sign that there is no true answer to moral dilemmas. It simply means that for the present we are unable to see or discover what the objective truth is. Another way of putting it is that we are confronted with an objective moral doubt, or theoretical doubt, concerning moral principles rather than a practical doubt concerning an action to be done here and now. One is not always able to find an immediate solution to a theoretical doubt. The next question is what is one expected to do when one cannot resolve a doubt by making reasonable use of the means at one's disposal in a concrete situation, and when it is nevertheless imperative to act one way or the other within a short period of time? What does one do if the doubt appears to be such that it cannot be resolved by an unanimous verdict of the community of moralists the world over?

Not all unresolvable moral doubts raise problems about others' rights or well-being. It would be unreasonable to expect people in this situation to always opt for the morally safer course once they had exhausted all reasonable means to resolve them to no effect. At times this could cause quite considerable inconvenience. People cannot be expected to do nothing every time they are confronted with a moral doubt that cannot be resolved. It would be naive to think
that these moral dilemmas will simply go away or disappear. Coping with moral
doubts is part of the human predicament. There must be a way out of this *impasse*
that somehow conforms with people’s personal dignity and moral integrity.

Moralists have thought a lot about this over the last couple of centuries, bearing
in mind the nature of humans as intelligent and free persons, created to choose
good and to avoid evil. Freedom is such a precious personal endowment that it
should have the benefit of the doubt, enjoying its privilege to choose, provided
moral evil is avoided and an action is not performed with a practical moral doubt.
This sort of moral dilemma has led Catholic moralists to the conclusion that an
irresolvable theoretical moral doubt about a kind of action cannot alone give rise
to a definitive moral obligation to avoid that same kind of action. In short, *a
person is morally free to act unless it is certain that a particular kind of action is
morally bad*. A doubtful obligation, in effect, is not morally obliging: it
constitutes no obligation. We can say it is certain that a doubtful theoretical
obligation is not morally binding. This way of resolving a practical doubt of
conscience is said to be the *indirect* method, because without resolving the
theoretical doubt, it solves the practical problem of what one should do here and
now, by having recourse to the so-called reflex principle: *-It is certain that a
doUBtful moral obligation is not a genuine moral obligation.*

It is obvious that this principle has many applications, including moral issues of a
purely personal nature where harm to another person is not considered a
possibility. Only the individual concerned can tell whether the viewing of a
particular film constitutes a personal moral problem after having viewed the film,
at least for a short time. Once the moral truth emerges one knows what one should,
or may, do – continue or cease viewing the film. It is to be noted, in passing, that
the answer for one person might not be the same as for another when it comes to
viewing the same film or reading the same book. We must not pay only lip-service
to the reality of the fact of individual differences in moral evaluations. Not only
may different persons be differently affected in the same situation: each person
should morally assess their own situation in good conscience case by case.

Morally permissible to follow a truly probable opinion

The above discussion throws some light on the meaning of a certain conscience.
So long as people have really solid reasons to support the morality of a particular
kind of action, it can hardly be held that the opposite view is certain. This means
that different people may have strong opinions in favour of a certain kind of action,
and still admit that the contrary view might also be moral or right. People in this
sort of situation could morally choose either course of action, all other things being
equal. This doctrine is called *probabilism*. It means an opinion is probable may be
followed in practice, if it is objectively probable, i.e. if there are really sound
reasons to support it. One way of being sure that one is not deluding oneself is to
see if any reputable moral theology authors agree with the opinion in question. This
is said only as a rule of thumb to help people satisfy themselves that their
consciences are sincere, and not subconsciously, unduly influenced by selfish
interests.
We need to be realists in life. We will often be disturbed by moral doubts. First we should seek to resolve the doubt by the *direct method*. Only if this fails should we have recourse to the *indirect method*. Provided we try to avoid self-deception, sincerely seek the truth and are ever willing to re-assess our judgment should the need arise, we should disregard any feelings of anxiety associated with this exercise. We feel comfortable when we can see everything clearly set out in black and white. This can be expected in mathematics and scientific disciplines, but not in all moral dilemmas. This is also part of the human predicament. We simply cannot always find a direct ready solution to every moral problem that presents itself. We should not feel guilty or anxious about what is inevitable. No doubt, mistakes will at times be made in good faith: this is regrettable, but unavoidable, when mature persons, caught up in the hustle and bustle of daily life, are to make morally responsible choices in accordance with their grasp of the objective truth. No moral evil occurs when a person is prudent and a mistake is still made in good faith. A violation of an objective moral norm can only be morally bad if it is done knowingly, with a doubtful conscience or without taking due diligence to clarify any outstanding moral ambiguities.

**Cooperation in unethical actions of others**

Difficult dilemmas of conscience can arise for staff at Catholic hospitals when cases of cooperation with the wrongdoing of others, staff members or otherwise, arise. To help solve these dilemmas, I’ll briefly outline the basic ethical principles governing different kinds of such cooperation.

Sometimes a good act has the *unwanted, but foreseen* side-effect of helping another to do something which is morally wrong. It is difficult to avoid situations where one’s innocent action is taken advantage of by another to do something wrong. This does not mean that such good actions should always or usually be omitted. It is always imperative to avoid performing an immoral action oneself and not to agree to do anything with the purpose of helping another succeed in performing any kind of immoral action. This is what moral theologians call *formal cooperation*, i.e. ‘if the intended “object” or “end” (including the chosen means) of one’s action is precisely to contribute to the other’s wrongful conduct, or if one otherwise shares in the other party’s “bad will”’. Formal cooperation may be *explicit* by giving support or encouragement, even if one does not physically take part in the unethical action, e.g. by advising or referring a pregnant woman to have an abortion. Formal cooperation would be *implicit* if a nurse agrees to participate in abortion by handing the necessary surgical instruments to the doctor performing the abortion. This action would be morally similar to the immoral action of the abortionist. Formal cooperation is also involved when leasing Catholic premises to others who want to set up an IVF clinic, including the creating of spare human embryos, some of which will probably be used, or transferred elsewhere, for destructive research. If an agreement is made to lease premises or land with knowledge of the likelihood of such immoral actions occurring, even without any staff from the Catholic hospital participating, the agreement would be formal cooperation with IVF or human embryo destruction, and would thereby be gravely immoral.

Cooperation is said to be *material* when one provides assistance by an innocent external action without sharing in the immoral purpose of another. Here the bad action is foreseen.

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29 *Code of Ethical Standards for Catholic Health and Aged Care Services in Australia*, (Canberra: Catholic Health Australia, 2001), 63.
but not willed or intended. The chief issue to consider in material cooperation is to ensure that the benefits and foreseen harms of material cooperation are proportionate and morally preferable to the benefits and harms of non-cooperation in the circumstances, all things considered. Consider the case of a nurse, Anne, who is supposed to follow routine and accompany her partner nurse, Barbara, while she administers drugs, including opiates, to patients in the ward. Once Anne failed to accompany Barbara at her request. Anne suspected Barbara may want to keep some opiates for herself instead of giving them to patients who needed them. In fact her suspicions proved true. Anne knew her material cooperation enabled the theft to occur as well as some patients missing out on their medication. Anne cooperated materially by not accompanying Barbara on her round for fear of the resulting bad feeling between herself and Barbara and the likely stress in the workplace. Anne may have been justified on that one occasion, but such material cooperation could not continue to be justified, especially out of consideration for the patients deprived of their opiates to relieve their pains or sufferings, not to mention misuse of the stolen opiates.

It is not always easy to determine if one has sufficient reasons to justify doing an innocent deed that gives another an occasion to perform an evil action. The closer one's freely given material cooperation helps another perform an immoral deed the more serious one's justifying reasons need to be. If an immoral action cannot be done without the help of another qualified person, greater reasons would be required for ethical material cooperation on account of his or her indispensability. Hardship may be a relevant factor in making such judgements if failure to cooperate could risk losing one’s job. Greater reasons for material cooperation are required in the case of a serious evil being done or if the good name and values of a Catholic institution are at stake. For example, if the scheduled anaesthetist for surgical abortion in a public hospital is absent, another anaesthetist could not morally volunteer to assist in the abortion if refusal could prevent the abortion.

Material cooperation is said to be remote when the relationship of one’s cooperative action makes little impact on whether another will perform the bad action. Less serious reasons could justify remote material cooperation in another’s unethical action. It would be legitimate remote material cooperation for an employee in a large Catholic hospital to sterilise all the surgical instruments of a neighbouring hospital where some surgical instruments may occasionally be used for abortion. A hospital employee whose duties include cleaning the floors of operating theatres where abortions are sometimes performed would likewise be justified to continue employment there. On the other hand, material cooperation may be so remote as to have no practical moral significance: one would not be justified in refusing to pay taxes on the grounds that public revenue is used to fund unethical medical procedures, such as induced abortion. A theatre nurse who rightly refuses to assist in surgical abortions would be morally justified to assist in an emergency that arose following an abortion and resulting in a serious risk to the life of the mother. If there were no other theatre nurse available, it would be morally obligatory to assist.

The above criteria should guide the actions of a hospital executive in relation to a one–off case of a surgeon who, with a sincere conscience, believed he should agree to comply with a woman’s request to be sterilised on the occasion of her undergoing abdominal surgery for some other reason, knowing it was contrary to hospital policy to do so. If the surgeon

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30 Code, 64
were to be warned and agreed to refrain from performing sterilisations, the hospital’s policy of not permitting sterilisation would still remain intact. Repeated disregard of this policy by any doctor, however, would warrant more severe action. A worse case scenario would be a Chief Executive Officer who out of fear of ill-will arising among the medical staff failed to intervene if doctors in a Catholic hospital were routinely giving referrals in the wake of Victoria’s 2008 Abortion Law Reform Act prescribes. This gross neglect would soon undermine the very identity of a Catholic hospital, and even risk its continued existence as a Catholic hospital. One solution would to include in doctors’ contracts with Catholic hospitals a requirement that they agree to abide by Catholic Health Australia’s Code of Ethical Standards.

Links between prenatal diagnosis and material cooperation in abortion are sometimes raised as a conscience issue and needs to be addressed. Prenatal diagnostic testing, e.g. amniocentesis, which should not be forced onto women, is usually offered to women whose ultrasound scans suggest that their unborn children have a higher than usual risk of a congenital malformation, for example the chromosome abnormality Trisomy 21 where there are three copies of chromosome 21 instead of two due to an error in the formation of the egg or sperm. Tests are offered to give a pregnant woman reassurance that her unborn child is healthy and normal, to gain information for the management of the pregnancy, to provide medication and other therapies. As I have written earlier: “Unless a woman intends to abort her unborn child once detected with an abnormality, prenatal diagnosis is ethically distinct from a subsequent decision to have an abortion.” Attending clinicians performing the tests would be free from material cooperation in her subsequent decision to have an abortion, provided there are no reasonable grounds to believe the woman wants the test with an intention to have an abortion depending on the results. In these circumstances, usually “an intention to terminate a wanted pregnancy would not be formed before it was confirmed the fetus was abnormal.” Whilst about 4.4% of cases of prenatal diagnosis do lead to a decision for an abortion, the results of about 95.6% of 5,000 cases indicate that the abnormalities for which they are tested are absent. Hence the remote material cooperation given by Catholic hospitals to a small percentage of mothers who abuse the service is proportionately justified by benefits offered to the vast majority of mothers who should not be denied this valuable service.

Finally in a Catholic Hospital setting, granted that not all staff members would have a correct understanding of the moral issues involved in offering prenatal scanning and diagnostic tests, steps would need to taken ensure all staff members are given an adequate explanation of the ethical situation involved. This is all the more necessary if there was any risk of scandal arising among some staff members that a Catholic Hospital was unethically cooperating in abortion. It would be no light matter to let some people wrongly believe that something immoral is being permitted in a Catholic Hospital.

Conscience and life in the community

There is no denying that not all people, including important public figures, agree in judgments of conscience on important issues that may concern matters of public policy. These may touch

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33 Ford, *The Prenatal Person*, 137
on public morality which in turn may affect the wellbeing of many persons, families, professions or even that of the nation if a morally unsound policy is enshrined in law. This can often cause harm to the common good or distress to many in the community, especially if legislation is imminent on a controversial moral issue such as unrestricted access to abortion. We must admit that we are not infallible – we can make mistakes without fault or through lack of due diligence. This realisation should urge us to pool our resources and information on relevant factors to enable the truth to emerge and thereby achieve some convergence of conscientious convictions. This would greatly enhance our living together in community if all were willingly, respectfully and sincerely to engage in genuine dialogue on controversial moral aspects of social and other practical issues. We might very well suspect the sincerity of one who does not always seek the truth and is not open to discussion with others in the quest for moral truth in the difficult and complex moral problems that frequently surface in contemporary society. The personal nature of conscience does not exempt people from duties imposed by their social and common human nature to collaborate in seeking objective moral truths and to pursue them in practice as far as possible.

In the final analysis it is up to each person to make the final judgment of conscience in all sincerity. A consensus that emerges from a shared vision of the truth is a great ideal and a moral value to be cherished by all who wish to promote the public interest. However, a consensus on moral views that results from many people compromising their consciences would be unworthy of the personal dignity of those involved. One should never renounce one’s judgement of conscience on a moral issue just to go along with the majority. By the same token, one may not induce others to act against their conscience by force, ridicule or by being made subject to jeering. Helping persons to see the truth is the only honourable way to enable others to change judgments of conscience without detriment to their personal dignity and integrity. Implicit in this discussion is that we must always respect the conscience of our neighbour even if we think it is erroneous. We should not forget Jesus’ saying: “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; forgive, you will be forgiven.” (Lk 6:36) People who live by this saying, will live on good terms with their friends and neighbours.

**Moral responsibility for previous actions**

So far we have been discussing the role of conscience before we perform, or omit, an action which is the usual meaning of conscience making judgments about actions. There is another meaning that refers to an action already performed or omitted by an individual. It is time to turn our attention to the assessment of responsibility for actions performed or omitted in the past. It is a matter of finding out the truth, bearing in mind the circumstances.

The true status of the moral responsibility for our actions is determined at the moment we perform them. Conscience judges the morality of our past actions to determine their true moral status, good or bad --- this also pertains to the realm of subjective morality. Conscience can also judge the degree of responsibility for these actions. Once this is done, we can truthfully assess the moral responsibility that we bear for the actions we have done, including their foreseen consequences, both intended and unintended. When we examine our conscience we should not attempt to change the presence, absence or degree of responsibility for actions previously done. We merely seek to find out the truth for actions done in the past along with their circumstances. In this case conscience judges after the event whether the act was right or wrong, moral or immoral. It can also judge the degree of responsibility for the act. Sometimes this exercise is referred to as examining.
our conscience. At times we know that we have done the ‘wrong’ thing, but somehow sincerely believe that we did not sin nor do anything gravely immoral at the time. We need to briefly consider the criteria that help our conscience judge aright our past actions and thereby correctly assess the degree of our moral responsibility for them.

Though the notion of responsibility applies to morally good as well as to morally bad actions, we usually assess our moral responsibility in relation to morally bad actions and their harmful consequences. It is in regard to these that conscience accuses us. As a general principle, we are responsible for those actions that we perform in a truly human way. This means that we are responsible for what we do provided we are awake and knowingly, willingly and freely perform these actions. The degree of responsibility for deeds performed varies in proportion to the degree of wakefulness, knowledge, appreciation of their good and bad features at the time and the degree of freedom with which they were performed. If any one of these essential characteristics of a truly human action is substantially diminished or entirely absent, there is a corresponding diminished human action or none at all. In this case, the imputation of moral responsibility by a correct conscience will need to vary accordingly.

There can be no imputation of morally bad actions to one who is asleep at the time of their performance. One who is asleep is not a moral agent and cannot perform a truly or fully human act. One is not morally responsible for what one does when sleep-walking. If one is half-asleep or dozing moral responsibility would be lessened accordingly, possibly down to none at all. One who is awake, but is inculpably unaware of the full malice of an action, cannot be held responsible for its malice to the extent that he or she was unaware of it at the time. This also applies to one who theoretically, and in principle, knows an action is wrong, but due to some subjective or psychological factor, fails to alert to the importance of the disvalues involved at the time on a particular occasion. This could happen in the sphere of personal or private life. One who becomes aware of this situation, should not condone it, but try to rectify it as best one can.

The matter is different when the ignorance is culpable in the first place: the agent would be morally responsible for the harm or damage caused by the action. Medical students who neglect their studies would be morally responsible for any subsequent harm their culpable ignorance may cause to their future patients. One should not get scrupulous here. The ignorance would have to be due to blameworthy neglect of studies. Lack of knowledge that remains in spite of the reasonable efforts made to learn what is required can hardly be called culpable. Medical students, doctors and nurses who are aware of their ignorance on a particular medical issue, and do little or nothing to gain the requisite knowledge to cope with their current professional duties, do not have their moral responsibility substantially diminished. They are bound to take reasonable steps to gain the duly required knowledge for their professional work as medical practitioners, surgeons, nurses or accountants, teachers, etc.

Feelings and emotions can also affect the actions a person performs. If the emotion arises spontaneously or without being fostered in a premeditated fashion, it can diminish responsibility for an action performed under its influence. This is done by inhibiting or clouding one's ability to choose freely or to think clearly enough for
proper deliberation to occur. Think of the fights in a game of football that sometimes follow a provocative gesture and angry retaliation. I am not suggesting there is no moral responsibility involved on most occasions. It is quite likely that it would be somewhat diminished or even non-existent in some cases. Other factors that may similarly diminish one's moral responsibility include anger, joy, excitement, grief, shame, pity, depression, disgust and emotional fear. It goes without saying that we are also morally bound to see to it that we keep our feelings, emotions and passions under reasonable control.

People sometimes act out of fear of failure, danger, embarrassment, or loss of money or goods. This is not the emotional type of fear referred to above. It does not cloud the mind, but it does prey on the will and provides a more or less strong motive for acting out of character. This type of fear does not usually remove responsibility, but it may lessen it somewhat. Again fear is to be taken relative to the person in question. Age, personality, physical strength as well as one's professional duties are to be taken into account in assessing one's moral responsibility for acts done out of a motive of fear. It is one thing for ordinary citizens and children who are by-standers to flee out of fear when a robbery is in progress in the street. It is quite another matter for police officers to fail to intervene as effectively as they reasonably could by taking to flight. Actions done under fear of threats, such as blackmail, do not substantially lessen one's moral responsibility. One ought not to perform an immoral act simply out of fear of being exposed for another misdeed.

Actions that are performed as a result of physical force being applied are obviously done against one's free will. Hence, one is not responsible for an act of sexual violence endured provided one does not consent to it. One should, however, offer physical resistance to it, but one would not be obliged to go so far as to provoke increased risks of serious bodily injury or even for one’s life. Passive resistance, coupled with internal resistance to consent, would suffice in such cases.

Actions that are done out of habit pose a difficulty for moral assessment. If one is aware of a habit, and is trying one's best to become free of it, then the moral responsibility for actions done as a result of the habit may be lessened. A case in point would be habitually blaspheming. Habits enable us to perform actions without much reflection. If the habit happens to be pleasurable, it is very easy to perform an action without sufficient knowledge or awareness for full moral responsibility to be incurred unless negligence is involved. The case is different if one deliberately allows the habit to grow unimpeded, or if one decides to do nothing about trying to get rid of it. There would be little lessening of moral responsibility for such acts since they would be willed in their cause, i.e. one who wills to maintain a habit wills also the acts that spontaneously result from that habit. This flows from and reflects the human condition.

People who have been raised in a district rife with violence and criminal activities, with little or no effective moral support from family or school, are likely to have a malformed conscience on some issues. These considerations may need to be taken into due account when assessing the moral responsibility for some actions done by them. The same would apply to those raised well in their home village and who subsequently migrate overseas to a large city, without any family or cultural
support to continue to live out their moral beliefs. Mount depicts their situation: “The anonymity of the city can give one the freedom to be himself, but it can also prevent him from discovering who he is and from becoming who he can become.”

It is helpful for everybody to obtain a true picture of themselves. Our sense of personal dignity and worth is more easily restored when we truthfully realise that we might not always be fully responsible for what we have done in the past, especially when we were quite young. We could be motivated to try a little harder and more constantly if we were to realise our past actions were not quite as morally bad as we had first thought. On the other hand, how many people give up trying to live the moral life believing that they are too bad to change, beyond redemption, so to say. This error is made because they mistakenly believe that the material doing of an objectively bad action in the past actually was and remains an immoral action. A person’s conscience, once truly enlightened, can acquit oneself entirely or for the most part of an action done in the past and relieve the person of some unnecessary burden. Think of the relief experienced when adults come to realise that some past sexual misbehaviour during early teenage years may have lacked the required knowledge for a serious moral offence to have occurred. This does not imply that an adult may now repeat such actions without serious moral blame. The more the truth abounds in the areas of objective and subjective morality, the happier and healthier people’s lives will be, at home, at work and in society.

3. Morality and ethics

To complement the earlier treatment of conscience, it would be well to be clear about what we understand by morality and ethics. For a start, morality and ethics have had much the same meaning, the former having a Latin and the latter a Greek derivation, both referring to the customs of communities or peoples, which gave rise to moral or ethical standards of behaviour. Today the term ethics refers more to the standard behaviour expected in professional and public life whereas morality, while also retaining a broader meaning, is often used to refer to one’s personal and private life. As rationally self-conscious and free beings we are moral agents in every sphere of activity -- at home, at work and in the community. For the most part, I shall use the term morality or moral in its broader meaning to cover every sphere of life, including professional and public. Morality considers a human action from the point of view of whether or not it befits the dignity of the human person and contributes to the true good of the person(s) affected by that action. To use both in one sentence, a person could be an excellent and ethical doctor, but immoral if the doctor had a reputation for marital infidelity.

We do not hear of a moral code for animals. A dog cannot be held morally responsible for its behaviour, even if it does attack and injure or kill a harmless child. The reason is quite simple: they do not have a rational nature and hence are not moral agents. They cannot understand what they are doing nor do they have free will because they do not have a rational nature which human beings have. Human beings are persons precisely because they are subjects of a rational nature. Human persons are moral agents, provided they are awake and to the extent in which they are aware of what they are doing, and to the degree in which their actions are freely done.

35 Mount, Conscience and Responsibility, 124.
36 For more on morality, ethics and the concept of the human person see N.M. Ford, The Prenatal Person, 3-27.
Something definite and unambiguous is understood when we say that an action is immoral even if we differ in what concrete actions we regard to be immoral. An immoral act is contrary to the good of the person. Consideration of a proposed immoral action, for example, using opium, would generate a moral obligation to avoid it. This obligation is derived from our understanding of what is contrary to the good of the person(s) and serves a summons on our free will to avoid it. There is an absolute and unconditioned necessity to avoid an immoral action, regardless of the consequences. The deliberate killing of innocent and harmless people is deemed to be immoral in the cultures of all civilised peoples.

Morality is concerned with doing good deeds and avoiding bad deeds. The question then arises what is good, what does it mean and how can we know what is good. This is the basic concern of ethics. The notion of good is pivotal for ethics in practice, and good in its turn is relational in its meaning -- good signifying good for us as persons. The good gives rise to a must for persons. Such goods are termed moral goods. They make unconditional demands on people’s freedom to be true to themselves as persons and to achieve the complete realisation of their potential as persons. Created persons are ever in a potential state, naturally reaching out for, striving after the actualisation of their capacities, self fulfilment and the satisfaction of their personal needs at every level of their being -- in a word, happiness. It is our common experience that we cannot but seek to be happy through our human actions. Good then is correlative to persons in a dynamically potential state with a need to achieve happiness – for themselves as well as for others. This appears to be the rationale underlying our experience of moral imperatives.

Experience provides the content, the material that is concretely judged good for us. Each concrete course of action is summed up, assessed, evaluated and measured against what we understand to be good – true goods for persons. This means that we function with a global concept of what it means to be a person, what corresponds to the needs of persons at every level of their being. Once concrete actions are understood to be linked with our true good, that failure to perform them would be detrimental to our genuine personal good, then those actions are judged to be morally imperative in an absolute, unconditioned way: they must be done. Likewise once concrete actions are seen to be in conflict with the true good of persons, they are judged to be bad and to be avoided absolutely and unconditionally. We understand that failure to comply with such moral imperatives would detract from our dignity as persons at the deepest level of our being and would give rise to the painful experience of shame.

From this we can see why tradition has ruled out the direct intending of what we understand to be morally evil in all cases and circumstances, no matter what other good purposes one might have in mind. The end does not justify the means; this maxim refers to directly intending a morally evil action so that another independent good end or purpose might be achieved. The direct intending of a morally bad action absolutely detracts from our personal dignity and worth. We may not deliberately poison a rich uncle in order to obtain the inheritance of a large sum of money, no matter how urgently we need the money for the best of causes. We need to see all the implications of a proposed course of action, to bear in mind all that is implied in being a person, its essential needs and network of relationships, linking an individual action with the person taken as a whole. From an overall consideration of persons’ nature and essential relationships, reason is able to discover that some kinds of action definitely conflict with the good of persons in an
absolute way and so proscribes them as immoral, e.g. direct killing of innocent human beings.

Statements about a moral issue may be true or false. Some say that surrogacy is always morally wrong while others say it may be morally permissible in some cases. These different moral evaluations of surrogacy show that moral truth is at stake. If we really thought that there were no moral truths there would be no point in arguing about the morality of any actions. We inquire about others’ likes and dislikes in food, but we do not try to prove they are true or false, right or wrong.

**Concept of the human person**

The concept of *person* is pivotal for determining what is good or not good, i.e. moral or immoral. In practice it is necessary to explore briefly the concept of the human person to make us more aware of moral and ethical obligations we owe to ourselves, but more importantly to others. There is a fundamental category distinction between *being* and *having*. We are acutely aware that each one of us is a unique subject of existence, not an object of possession. Through our conscious sensations, activities, feelings or personal encounters, the self is revealed as both personal and relational. These experiences arise in the well-spring of our subjectivity and we recognise them as our own. All that constitutes us belongs to our human nature and shares in our own and others’ personal dignity: human reason, free will, the body with all its parts, organs, limbs, sensations, affections, feelings and sexuality. Their purpose and significance are to be interpreted from a personalist, and not simply a biological, point of view. We are *one* with our human nature: a wedge cannot be driven between it and the person – ourselves and others. Obviously opportunities for moral education will be needed, beginning with the basics of ethics to lay a firm foundation for the formation of people’s consciences suited to their employment and professional responsibilities.

**Subjective approach to understanding the human person**

The experience of sincere and morally responsible relationships and of doing good together is unique to human beings and must be fostered for authentic growth as persons, even if it is painful to trim back the culturally entrenched individualism typical of our times. As Mounier says so well: “A sort of philosophic myopia tends to see the centre and pivot of freedom in the act of choice, whereas it lies in the progressive liberation to choose the good.” One who loves experiences liberation from whatever is base and degrading in oneself.

Living in isolation from others impoverishes the person and risks reducing the experience of oneself to the level of mere sensation. We perceive ourselves primarily as personal human beings, not patients, doctors, nurses, employers or employees. Yet as a patient the experience of, at times, enforced isolation from our families or communities can cause us to doubt our self-perception as a personal being. Nurses, physicians and other health professionals must be acutely conscious of the tendency to objectify patients.

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38 Emmanuel Mounier, *Personalism*, 1952, 63

39 For more on this theme see Mounier, *Personalism*, 17-32
The desire for good health, general wellbeing and genuine, lasting happiness pertains to the core of a person’s subjectivity and dignity. It engages the power of our intelligence and free will: we cannot but wish to be happy and to achieve our potential for self-realisation. Persons, patients and healthcare professionals need to be affirmed, appreciated and supported. Failing to respond to the needs of others to be happy is to fail ourselves.

Objective approach to understanding the human person

The foundation of the human person’s subjectivity and dignity is none other than human nature itself, which is essentially capable of understanding and reasoning. Interests, experiences and activities are an expression of the human person in virtue of the inherent capacities of human nature. Notwithstanding individual differences, we recognise all human persons are equal in dignity, whose foundation is our common rational human nature that makes us social and underpins human solidarity. We are all equal in personal dignity, regardless of differences in sex, talents, race, ideology or creed.

True good and moral necessity

The meaning of good is not derived from another notion because good is a basic or primary notion: it is primitive in the sense that it is not derived from another idea. For example, our idea of blue is something original, given in experience and is not derived from the colour red. For the moral evaluation of actions, good is related to our understanding of the human person(s) affected. Good means good for the person and this includes a reference to the person's purpose, which in turn depends on their inherent nature. What is truly good for a person is also a good of the person. This is why good must be done, and what is not good must be avoided. Our understanding of a human person is the constant referral point to determine if an action is truly good and ought to be done or not. Moral necessity results from reason’s reluctance, or inability to approve the deliberate and intentional performance of an action which is known to be contrary to our true good as persons. It is the true integral good of human persons that provides the foundation and ultimate rationale for morality. Acting in an authentically human way is a requirement of being true to ourselves as persons. In this sense morality is not an outside imposition on human freedom or ourselves. Believers in God can take the foundations of morality further. They believe that the true good is ultimately dependent on God's design in creating us with our human nature.

After having shown that immorality concerns what is not good and that all should avoid it, it is now a matter of turning our attention to consider how to find out what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong. In other words, we are looking for the criterion of morality. I shall touch on two ethical theories before giving my own view.

Emotive theory of ethics

Moral discourse often includes our emotional attitudes of approval or disapproval of particular actions. This is not surprising when we think that our senses, feelings and emotions are an integral part of the human person and are closely linked to human knowledge. Feelings usually signal our first positive or negative response to an action. The philosopher A J Ayer first popularised the expression of emotional attitudes of approval or disapproval of acts with their morality in what is known as the emotivist
theory of ethics.\textsuperscript{40} On reflection, however, we realise that our emotive attitudes for or against some kinds of actions are the consequence of our recognition of the moral or immoral status of these actions. Our feelings and attitudes do not constitute the morality of an action. There is a residue of meaning for some actions that cannot be reduced to our emotive attitudes. It is precisely in this residue that the meaning of morality is to be found. For example, undue delay in giving a patient the required opiates for the relief of pain is recognised as something cruel, and generated a negative feeling of disgust. The recognition that this sort of behaviour denies a patient due relief of pain generated the disgust, and not vice versa.

Utilitarianism

The second theory is broadly labelled \textit{consequentialism}, according to which the morality of actions generally depends on their consequences. One form of this is known as \textit{Utilitarianism} and is quite prevalent in our culture and public life. \textit{Classical utilitarianism} holds that whatever promotes the greatest utility or pleasure for the greatest number with the least pain to the fewest is the morally right thing to do. This theory need not at all espouse selfish individualism since it has universal applicability – this is a requirement of Peter Singer for any ethical theory: interest sought should transcend those of oneself. Singer has improved classical utilitarianism by reformulating it:

'I ... begin to think ethically, to the extent of recognising that my own interests cannot count for more, simply because they are my own, than the interests of others... I must choose the course of action that has the best consequences, on balance, for all affected.'\textsuperscript{41}

It is to be noted that interests are to be understood broadly to include whatever people desire. Singer believes the utilitarian position represents the bare minimum -- the first step to be taken to avoid being locked into a selfish and egoistic perspective.\textsuperscript{42} He admits there is also scope for self-interest and the seeking after happiness; by living ethically we further our best interests.\textsuperscript{43}

\textit{Utilitarianism} has its rightful place as a secondary, but not the basic, criterion of morality. To be moral, we often have to subordinate our interests to the benefit of others. The basic criterion of morality, however, relates to the true good of the agent before any calculations are made about the beneficial effects an act may have for others. A person's obligation to others derives from the duty to be true to oneself in the light of our neighbours' needs. This is because a person's rational and social nature requires due attention be given to the interests of other persons, and for that matter, of animals and of the environment as well.

It may be asked how can one person's interests be evaluated when the interests of other people are not at all relevant? Is there not a criterion of morality for a person is living all alone, e.g. a hermit? Do not interests belong to a subject who is the foundation of their worth and value?

For Singer newborn infants enter the moral equation only because they can feel pain, not because they are human beings. Once no allowance is made for rational human nature as


\textsuperscript{42} See \textit{ibid.} 14.

\textsuperscript{43} See \textit{ibid.} 326; 334.
the foundation of a person's subjectivity, objective dignity and absolute value, it would not be possible to hold that a newborn infant could be a person prior to experiencing some minimal rational self-conscious acts. A utilitarian like Singer is open to these criticisms because he does not admit there could be a non-material life-principle for a human individual.

**Right reason - criterion of morality**

We intuitively know the basic and underived first moral principle -- *good is to be done and what is not good (bad) is to be avoided*. Other important moral principles are universally accepted, such as those that regard the following deeds as immoral: rape, racism, perjury and genocide. Intuition has its importance in moral deliberations, but it alone cannot be an adequate and comprehensive criterion of morality. Difficult moral problems such as *in vitro* fertilisation, surrogacy and the use of nuclear arms as a deterrent require reason to analyse and evaluate carefully all the relevant aspects of each proposed action before moral acceptance or rejection could be discerned with certitude. Reason, then, seems to be the basic criterion of moral truth because it alone has the capacity of performing the complex task of analysis, comparison and evaluation required of the criterion of moral truth.

Many people spend much time reasoning on moral problems but they do not always come to the same conclusions. They cannot all be right if there are disagreements. This is why *right reason* has been traditionally adopted as the criterion of objective morality. This implies reason has to be employed with a suitable method and in an appropriate framework in order to be rational and reasonable. This requires that its use be comprehensive and logically consistent. We need to bear in mind that the concept of the human person is the *referral point* for the moral evaluation of all acts with respect to the true good of all persons affected.

When human actions are morally evaluated, it is presupposed they are performed knowingly and voluntarily. When we say it is unethical for a health professional to give a patient an overdose of medication, it is taken for granted that the action which is contrary to the true good of the patient is performed deliberately and intentionally. Circumstances and additional motives may vary, but the variations are assumed to be morally irrelevant from the unethical act, say, of “giving a patient an overdone of a drug” or of “removing a healthy organ from a living patient”. In saying these actions are wrong, we take for granted the usual circumstances are present. On the other hand, the life-saving removal of a healthy organ may be ethical if it prevents the spread of disease as in the case of prostate cancer. In this particular case, castration, with the informed consent of the patient concerned, would become a life-saving action in these special circumstances in that it would prevent the production of hormones in the blood, that could spread cancerous cells throughout the patient’s whole body.

In the light of persons' essential nature, integral human experience and important relationships such as marriage, *right reason* is able to discern that some acts conflict with the good of persons and judges them to be bad. If the immorality of an action does not derive from factors extrinsic to the action, such as custom or others' opinions, it is said to be intrinsically wrong or bad. The deliberate bombing of civilian populations and the

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44 See Norman Ford 'The Human Person and Life's Journey”, *Chisholm Health Ethics Bulletin* 2/3 (1997) 10-11,
torturing of children are examples of immoral acts that could not be justified under any circumstances. There is, however, no need to put all intrinsically bad acts in the same basket. Some bad actions are worse than others. The undue withdrawal of a life-support machine from a patient who is expected to survive in good health would be worse than giving a patient a routine beneficial medication without bothering to obtain the patient’s informed consent in advance. There is a world of moral difference in these two actions. An appreciation of degrees of immorality or badness of actions is important for the mental health of individuals. It would be disastrous for individuals if every minor moral infringement was treated as a grave fault: the number of neurotic people would increase to the detriment of individuals and of the community.

On account of our social nature there is an obligation to positively promote the common good of persons. To some extent we are subordinated to the common good without being reduced to the status of mere means for its achievement. Each person has an absolute dignity that transcends the social order and the requirements of the common good. We should act responsibly in regard to ourselves and others in the community. We may be obliged to make sacrifices of time, energy and money for others and the common good but we may not sacrifice our personal dignity by doing bad actions for the benefit of others. It would be unethical for a health professional to perform a direct abortion simply because an unborn child has been diagnosed to have a congenital abnormality. Complying with the parents' wishes or conforming with a policy that encourages cost savings by reducing the number of newborn babies born with disabilities cannot be ethically justified and is seriously immoral.

Questions for readers

Is an action good because it is morally binding, or morally binding because it is a necessary good for the person(s) integrally considered?

How should the answer to the previous question influence how we practise healthcare ethics in hospitals, age care facilities, etc.?

Case studies

Case 1

Serena is a mother of four children 7, 5, 2 and 11 months. She has long suffered from severe and debilitating periods: heavy bleeding, strong cramps, and migraine type headaches. In addition, her menstrual cycle has always been irregular, even erratic. With four young children and part-time employment she finds that the situation is simply too much to manage.

Serena and her partner would like more children in the future so permanent sterilization is not an option for them. They have tried a variety of means of contraception but have found each of them unsatisfactory for a range of reasons. Her gynaecologist has suggested using the Mirena IUD. Serena is contemplating this course of action.

Case 2

Mrs O’Farrell is a 38 year old woman, happily married for 19 years. She and her husband are both staunch Christians, prominent members of their parish and believers
in the sanctity of life. The O'Farrell’s have nine children aged between 18 months and 16 years. During her last pregnancy Mrs O'Farrell suffered from severe high blood pressure and as a result was hospitalised for three months. This placed a serious burden on the rest of the family, both financially and emotionally. Mrs O'Farrell finds that she is pregnant again; her doctors counsel for termination.

Case 3

Bill is an 18 year old only child of a single parent. He and his mother do not have any other relatives. His mother is critically injured in a car accident. She has sustained severe head injuries. On arrival at the hospital she is placed on life support. Two days later the doctors indicate that there is little hope of recovery and suggest that life support is terminated. Further, they ask Bill that when his mother reaches the point of brain death would he consent to her organs being used for transplant.

Case 4

Elizabeth, a mother in her sixties was weeding her garden when she had a heart attack. An ambulance was called she was resuscitated and taken to a large public hospital. The following day she had a second heart attack and was given PCR. Soon after she also had a stroke that left her paralysed along one side of her body. Her two daughters in their thirties were briefed by the medical team that their mother’s situation was not good at all because they expected her to have another heart attack. The medical team said they were not planning on giving her CPR again because they were convinced it would be futile in the circumstances and, besides, it would be too painful and distressing for her. The daughters strongly disagreed denying their mother was dying because only two days earlier she had been working in her garden. They insisted she be given CPR each time she had a heart attack. What course of action should be followed in this situation?

4. Sidney Callahan

Psychological insights on conscience

Sidney Callahan highlights that conscience does not work in isolation: “Self-consciousness in a moral decision of conscience has to operate in a complex double-directed way. There must be an awareness or connectedness with the real outer environment of the self as self. Moral action requires both consciousness of self and consciousness of a reality or standards beyond the self.”45 This definition reflects her holistic view: of conscience as a “personal self-conscious activity, integrating reason, emotion and will in self-committed conscious activity about right and wrong, good and evil.” 46 She is well aware that a “sense of self and self-conscious agency is the necessary ground of conscience and all moral decision making.”47

Callahan’s holistic view of conscience flows into her account of the role of our emotional life in the dynamics of conscience: “The consciousness of self and personal

46 Callahan, In Good Conscience, 14.
47 Callahan, In Good Conscience, 199.
reality is constituted to a great extent by the continuity of subjective emotional experience from infancy to old age. … Emotions accompany the functioning of the inner subjective self, as well as offer an important way of communicating with, and responding to, the world. They provide us with our sense of reality and give vividness to the experience of being alive.”

Callahan explains that “Our long-term memory may determine what will get through to our limited resources of conscious attention…. This is one reason why emotions, like intuitions, are worth attending to; they are, in a sense, ‘vital signs’ or signals from myself to myself.”

Granted that reasoning, feeling and emotions are so closely connected in daily life, it would come as no surprise to learn that emotional disturbances could affect normal thinking patterns and the functioning of conscience itself. Callahan explains the dire consequences of emotional disturbances: “Since thought and feeling are so interwoven, most emotional distortions and regressions are also marked by distorted, irrational thinking patterns. … Without love or empathy, without guilt or shame, persons become morally impaired. … they cannot really feel the moral imperative or oughught of the rules as part of their own reactions. They do not feel the emotional ‘mustness’ or demand of conscience, nor do they feel anxiety or fear over possible transgressions. Finally, they feel no guilt or shame when they intellectually know that they have transgressed. …For whatever reason, they are numbed or tone-deaf to moral feelings.”

It is important not to confuse the situation of remorseless hardened criminals with that of the morally blameless mentally disabled whose conscience may be unable to function. She is quite right: “Mentally retarded, mentally ill, or brain-diseased persons can lack sufficient consciousness of self and their environment to make moral decisions. The brain diseases or injuries that take away self-awareness and the memory necessary for continuous identity are destructive to moral functioning.”

Callahan, however, does not think the situation is hopeless: “Emotions are not outside the realm of moral responsibility….Emotions can be suppressed, shaped, controlled, directed, and engendered by all the other functioning sub-systems available to the self as a self-conscious agent.” She believes the key to successful control lies in the power to control attention and illustrates it with references to the behaviour of some prisoners: “The mental resistance of some modern prisoners … provides evidence of the ways thought and focused attention can control emotional reactions of fear and depression, and the urge to surrender to the forces of oppression.”

She values recourse to positive emotions to off-set negative emotions: “Emotions, reason, and intuition should be fully integrated and engaged to produce a complex approach to moral decision making. We need to make decisions in a holistic way that does justice to all our moral resources.”

**Self-deception**

Callahan deals with self-deception exceptionally well, and with great psychological insights. She starts with her definition: “Self-deception, in its broadest sense, has been
defined as refusing acknowledgment through motivated evasive strategies of different kinds—and then to evade the knowledge that one has done so. Just as people are rightly blamed for carelessness or undue diligence, we can also see that persons could have, indeed should have, made efforts to find out what they ought to have known. As the Nazi Albert Speer said about the death camps, ‘I didn’t inquire because I didn’t want to know’. Such self-deceptive ignorance is blameworthy because it is the result of motivated active avoidance.

It is easy to resemble Speer. At times a premonition that something may be wrong suffices to persuade us to look no further into what may be inconvenient to know. Examples occur of “self-deception motivated by a desire not to face morally demanding truths that are suspected or already halfway known. In our complex mental functioning, that includes a preconscious filtering system, there seems to be hazy states that exist as forms of intuitive knowing, falling somewhere between explicit knowledge and true ignorance.” As soon as something threatening looms in our awareness, we realise we may need to invent a cover-up account of things and then do our best to forget all about it. As Callahan says: “Humans are clever at using partial truths and subtle but slipshod reasoning to project and avoid moral responsibility. The major move in most self-deception is to keep attention focused outward, away from one’s own inner suspicions.”

While the experience of feelings of guilt is not pleasant, these same feelings are a healthy reminder that we have a conscience, that we have failed, but do usually care as Callahan notes: “Guilt and shame are marks that a self-conscious self is present and operating as a moral evaluator…Shame is supposedly more oriented to outward social failure. … Guilt, by contrast, is described as a feeling of individual, personal responsibility for wrongdoing in which one’s moral responsibility is salient. We know we should have, and could have, acted differently, but chose not to.”

Need for adequate moral formation

Callahan strongly endorses early development of children being supported by mother and father with adequate parenting in a suitable child-rearing environment. It is helpful to avoid harmful heated talk in front of children as well as damaging gossip about others: doing this may distort perceived family and societal moral values, thereby potentially having a negative impact on the formation of their conscience. Granted the integrated unity of the young people and how they readily and well they relate to positive experiences and in various ways identify with persons they admire she realises it is beneficial to favour and even create opportunities for these developments to eventuate. Hence she stresses the need for schooling to complement family moral

55 Callahan, In Good Conscience, 153.
56 Callahan, In Good Conscience, 154.
57 Callahan, In Good Conscience, 154.
58 Callahan, In Good Conscience, 155.
59 Callahan, In Good Conscience, 159.
60 Callahan, In Good Conscience, 163-64.
61 Callahan, In Good Conscience, 200-03.
formation and general moral development with commitment to truth and the good and virtues in the following of a ‘conscience curriculum’. One could imagine how this could be fostered by guiding young people in the study of the humanities coupled with discussions to enable them to learn from diverse worthwhile characters and to recognize the negative aspects of other characters that are far from being good role models for them. She is well aware of the need to capitalise on the benefits of religious practice and moral education and suggests that “literary sources and Scriptures also provide a source of moral exemplars par excellence.” Teachers need to make good uses of these sources. Good consciences can only be formed under the influence of good persons and a well planned moral formation program that is followed through with the support of young peoples’ families and the school staff.

Questions for readers

Can feelings or emotions be a sign that I may have done something wrong?
Can feelings or emotions be proof that I have done something wrong?
Can feelings or emotions lead us astray?
What should we do if we suspect we may be involved in self-deception?
What should we do if we experience feelings of guilt?
Could you add to Sidney’s suggestions to improve the moral formation of the young?

PART TWO

5. Conscience in Greek and New Testament Writings

Ancients Greeks

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62 Callahan, In Good Conscience, 205, and see also 202-208.
The meaning of conscience traces itself back to a Greek word συνείδησις (syneidēsis) which is correctly, but not always, translated as conscience. It literally means ‘joint knowledge’, ‘a seeing together’, ‘a knowing with oneself’, ‘conscience’. There does not seem to be a clear equivalent of the term syneidēsis in the Hebrew Bible. It is found only three times in the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament. Many scholars hold that this term had its origin in Stoic sources. This claim has been examined by C.A. Pierce who found it lacked credible support and was “quite unnecessary.” The claim that the Stoic philosopher Epictetus used it does not stand up to critical examination of the evidence. St Paul in his letters frequently uses syneidēsis, but the Stoic Epictetus was only about four years old when St. Paul died. Pierce could only conclude: “The assumption then of a Stoic origin for the Pauline συνείδησις [syneidēsis] rests on quite insufficient evidence, and is inherently improbable.”

In popular discourse the usual meaning of syneidēsis is to know with oneself the content of consciousness, i.e. “the moral quality of the subject’s own acts or character.” Normally the reference is to something morally “bad”-- “whether a disposition, a condition or an action”. This is the case in popular usage unless it is stated otherwise, or implied by its context. Furthermore in its popular usage it is explicitly associated with the subject’s badness, but occasionally there is no reference to the subject’s awareness of any bad activity. In short, it can be said that the use of syneidēsis indicates an expectation of something whose content is bad.

According to popular ancient Greek authors, the meaning of syneidēsis also includes a reference to nature, specifically human nature, which is integrally linked to nature understood as an ordered universe. Socrates is content to let his false accusers suffer the penalty that ordered nature provides by awareness of their perjury, sacrilege and injustice. After wrong doing syneidēsis, implanted within the souls of all human beings by God, performs the role of witness and accuser of evil done and thereby induces a natural punishment for bad deeds. Another thread of meaning resides in syneidēsis is the divinity, God, who is responsible for the order found in the universe and for implanting syneidēsis within the soul of every human being. It often refers to the subject’s specific past bad actions acts. As Pierce puts it: “All the evidence in fact shows that the use of syneidēsis is almost always subsequent to the bad act to which it refers – whether that act be merely the embarkation on a long process or instantly complete in itself.” The function of syneidēsis can be put in different ways, but according to Greek authors “the notion fundamental to them all is that of pain.”

Teachers and life are sources of much learning for those who are growing up. By adulthood, syneidēsis becomes aroused, perhaps recalling previous experiences, so as

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64 Ibid. 13.
65 Ibid. 14.
66 Ibid. 15.
67 Ibid. 22.
68 Ibid. 23, 24.
69 Ibid. 27.
70 Ibid. 27.
71 Ibid. 28-29.
72 Ibid. 40-41.
73 Ibid. 44-45; also 40-45.
74 Ibid. 45-46.
to intervene to protect people from physical and moral harm. It is almost as if memory of a bad deed arouses fear of pain and helps people to avoid harm, physical or moral, and to choose harmless behaviour. Pierce confirms the meaning of syneidêsis saying it was “without significant variation, throughout the history of the Greek language, to a point at least long after the period during which the New Testament was being written.”

**New Testament**

The term syneidêsis, (conscience) makes one of its few appearances in the Greek Septuagint version of the Book of Wisdom: “Wickedness is confessedly very cowardly, and it condemns itself; under pressure from conscience, it always assumes the worst” (17:11). The Jews were well aware of their moral obligations, and not only the observances and traditions handed on to them by their teachers. The Psalmist says: “God, create in me a clean heart, renew within me a resolute spirit, do not thrust me away from your presence, do not take me away from your spirit of holiness” (Ps 51: 10-11). The inner moral life of the human heart was stressed very much by the prophets in the Old Testament heritage, alongside a sometimes exaggerated importance given to external observances in legal texts and practices. Bernard Häring sums up the Old Testament’s outlook succinctly: “The profound vision of man’s heart, where he is touched and moved by the Spirit, overcomes all merely extrinsic morality. It is the great message of the prophets that God will write his law in the person’s heart, in his innermost being … “The sin … is engraved … on the tablet of their heart” (Jr 17:1).”

Jesus in his preaching stressed love of God and of neighbour rather the observance of external rituals and traditional practices without reference to the term conscience as such. Jesus taught that even a man’s lustful look at his neighbour’s wife is adultery “in his heart” (Matt. 5:28). Rudolf Schnackenburg makes this comment: “There are many other sayings which designate the heart as the seat of thoughts, desires and emotions, and also of moral judgment, taking over the functions we ascribe to conscience, for which there is no specific word in the gospels.”

Pierce says it is considered certain that the New Testament writers “not only took over the word syneidêsis, conscience, and its connotation complete from Greek popular thought but also left them in general as they found them.” The pain of conscience is felt after one has sinned, done something bad or begun a bad deed. Indeed nature’s pain of conscience appears to be more of an objective sign of having done a bad deed than relying on unconvincing reasoning or whims of convenience. Civil powers and conscience complement each other in relation to the pain for having done bad deeds:

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75 Ibid. 53.
76 All quotations from the Bible are taken from The New Jerusalem Bible, New York: Doubleday, 1985
79 Ibid. 108
80 Ibid. 86
“both are parallel manifestations of God in action to maintain the order of things:” 81 -- one penalty comes from outside, society, the other from within, conscience.

The use of synéidêsis, in the New Testament at times differs from its typical morally bad sense in Greek popular usage. For example St Peter uses the word synéidêsis, but it cannot in the context mean conscience: it simply means awareness or consciousness. For example, referring to slaves Peter says: “You see, there is merit if, in awareness [synéidêsis] of God, you put up with the pains of undeserved punishment”( I P 2:19).

The meaning of synéidêsis changes when employed in the context of the Christian vision of the good news as portrayed in the Gospels and the New Testament. By then there is a new situation entirely, where Almighty God, Creator of the world, sent his only Son, Jesus Christ, to become one of us to reveal his Father’s and his own love for fallen humanity and to offer salvation to all through his sufferings, death and resurrection. Whilst the meaning of the term synéidêsis for the Ancient Greeks remained intact its implications were enhanced and expanded when used in the new context of the horizons of the mysteries and wonders of the Christian faith that inspired and offered hope. 82 The New Testament writers made excellent use of the term synéidêsis to expound their vision of Christian moral living, whose first all embracing command given by Jesus is to love God and one’s neighbour as oneself. The Letter to the Hebrews explains how our natural conscience can be purified and enriched by Christ: “How much more will the blood of Christ, who offered himself, blameless as he was, to God through the eternal Spirit, purify our conscience from dead actions so that we can worship the living God” (Heb. 9:14).

In conclusion, Pierce summarises conscience in the New Testament as “the painful reaction of man’s nature, as morally responsible, against infringements of its created limits – past, present by virtue of initiation in the past, habitual or characteristic by virtue of frequent past infringements.” 83 Though this is true, the use of synéidêsis by New Testament writers, especially, Paul, is not limited to this original meaning alone.

St Paul

Pierce says St. Paul is “definite that conscience only comes into play after at least the initiation of a wrong act.” 84 Paul himself, however, went beyond the meaning of synéidêsis inherited from ancient popular Greek usage. He uses conscience several times where it does not imply any bad deeds which lead to pain arising from guilt: “This is the truth and I am speaking in Christ, without pretence, as my conscience testifies for me in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 9:1); “in God’s sight we commend ourselves to every human being with a conscience by showing the truth openly … the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (II Cor 4:2-3); “God sees us for what we are, and I hope your consciences do too” (II Cor 5:11). He also says: “There is one thing that we are proud of, namely our conscientious conviction that we have always behaved towards everyone, and especially towards you, with that unalloyed holiness that comes from God, relying not on human reasoning but on the grace of God” (II Cor. 1:12). A modern scholar, Philippe Delhaye, also thinks along the lines of Paul: “By his

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81 Ibid. 71. Pierce gives a long list of New Testament references where the word συνείδησις occurs in a morally bad context, 62
82 Ibid. 110.
83 Ibid. 108.
84 Ibid. 109.
conscience, man is aware of God’s will and applies it to his moral life. Faith thus produces the fruits of good works.”

**Paul on moral imperatives of conscience**

Paul, in a discussion of God’s retribution for sin makes it clear there is no escape for wrong doers, be they Jews in accord with their Law or Greeks who do not have this law but still know what is wrong to do. He says in his Letter to the Romans:

“For the ones that God will justify are not those who have heard the law but those who have kept the law. So, when gentiles, not having the Law, still through their own innate sense behave as the Law commands, then, even though they have no Law, they are a law for themselves. They can demonstrate the effect of the Law, engraved on their hearts, to which their own conscience ([syneidēsis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syneidēsis)) bears witness” (Rom. 2, 13-15).

Paul’s message is that what counts is the keeping of the Law, not simply hearing it. His point is that the gentiles have God’s law written in their hearts and this is recognised by reason and witnessed by the pangs of conscience that are experienced following wrong doing.

Referring to State authority’s power and the duty of Christians to obey civil law, Paul takes into account the protective role of conscience from enduring pain even when external fear is absent: “You must be obedient, therefore, not only because of this retribution, but also for conscience’s sake.” (Rom. 13:5) Pierce understands that Paul was aware that the pain of conscience still operates from within the self even when one is aware punishment will not be forthcoming from the authorities.

Paul holds that everybody, Greeks as well as Jews, on account of their rational nature, are capable of discovering what is right or wrong, good or bad, namely, the basics of the moral law, by reflecting on God as Creator, and themselves as creatures with their own nature. This hints at what subsequently came to be known as the natural moral law, whose principal precepts can be recognised by natural reason, and by [syneidēsis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syneidēsis), especially after doing some bad deed. Reason and conscience act as a guide for every human being. With the help of memory, conscience warns us of our moral obligations and the inner sanctions that follow violations.

**Paul on erroneous conscience**

People with erroneous consciences abound and the sources of errors are varied. False information and environmental conditions can also influence human activities for the better or worse. It may be inaccurate knowledge concerning the morality of an action, the local culture or long term habits. For Christians it may be, as Pierce suggests, an “imperfect awareness of Christ as judge, and of the standard which he embodies and by which he must judge; and insufficient quickening of the inner man by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.”

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86 Pierce, 71.
88 Ibid. 88-89.
or even by mischievous lies, to one’s regret. Paul warned his Christians to be on their guard lest they in time be “seduced by the hypocrisy of liars whose consciences are branded as though with a red-hot iron” (I Tim 4:2). Delhaye comments that the conscience of such a Christian “becomes incapable of performing a good action. The conscience is corrupted for it has not decided to choose what is good nor to impose its judgement.” ³⁸⁹ However, lack of awareness of doing anything bad does not mean that one’s conscience is in accord with Jesus’ injunctions: “It is true that my conscience does not reproach me, but that is not enough to justify me: it is the Lord who is my Judge” (I Cor. 4:4).

Paul was aware that some Corinthian Christians were burdened by ill-formed consciences regarding foods that had been offered to idols and thereby made those who consumed them “ritually unclean.” Paul knew quite well the idols were not divine at all. There is only one true God – other so-called gods do not exist. Hence food could not be defiled by non-existent gods. However, if one falsely believes food is unclean, then it is so for him, as Paul says: “I am sure, and quite convinced in the Lord Jesus, that no food is unclean in itself; it is only if someone classifies any kind of food as unclean, then for him it is unclean” (Rom. 14:14). He drives the point home further “There are some in whose consciences false gods still play such a part that they take food as though it had been dedicated to a god; then their conscience being vulnerable, is defiled” (I Cor. 8:7). Delhaye comments that those with such consciences suffer from “weakness of character; they allow themselves to be led on by the example of others to do what they disapprove of in their hearts.” ³⁹⁰

Paul on faith and conscience

Paul expands the notion of conscience for a Christian for whom faith in Christ and his teaching encompasses conscience itself to the point where ‘faith’ may become the equivalent of ‘right conscience’ or ‘conviction’. For Paul one who eats food whilst doubting it may be unclean, sins: “But anyone who eats with qualms of conscience is condemned, because this eating does not spring from faith – and every action which does not spring from faith [πίστις] is sin” ³⁹¹ (Rom. 14:23b). Reflecting on this last statement of Paul, Schnackenburg writes: “For moral theology this is a classical text demonstrating that the conscience, even if it judges wrongly, is the ultimate and decisive measure of morality,” ³⁹² – at least for subjective morality, I personally would add. For Paul “faith [πίστις] is the whole attitude of the Christian, assimilating his judgments of moral worth too. The Christian is not divided within himself, with a natural economy and a supernatural one; there is only one judgement of conscience and it is determined by his belief.” ³⁹³ Paul showed he was the defender of a genuine Christian believer who acts in accordance with a sincere conscience. Christian freedom, then, in Paul’s mind is a precious gift, not to be given up for the sake of rules, but only for the sake of charity, to save hurting the erroneous conscience of a brother in the faith.

Clearly if faith has such an important influence on conscience, erroneous views or interpretations of the faith could easily lead to errors in a Christian conscience which in turn lead to further errors of conscience whereby it could eventually become scarcely

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³⁹¹ Here the sense is “right conscience”. See note in The New Jerusalem Bible.
recognised as Christian, with great harm to the person concerned. Häring is in sympathy with Paul’s account of those who acknowledge God but neglect the grace and call of grace. 94 “To those who are pure themselves, everything is pure; but to those who have been corrupted and lack faith, nothing can be pure – the corruption is both in their minds and in their consciences. They claim to know God but by their works they deny him; they are outrageously rebellious and quite untrustworthy for any good work.” (Tt 1:15-16)

Paul on charity and conscience

Charity is an essential support and guide for conscience: “It is my prayer that your love for one another may grow more and more with the knowledge and complete understanding that will help you to come to true discernment” (Phil 1:9). In Galatians he is sterner still: “If you go snapping at one another and tearing one another to pieces, take care: you will be eaten up by one another” (Gal 5:15). In these texts Schnackenburg thinks that Paul was “making Christian charity the key to knowledge, the sign pointing the way to morally good behaviour.”95 Clearly charity is absolutely fundamental to the formation of a Christian conscience.

The pangs of conscience strike after one does something bad. Christians have been freed from sin by Christ in order to sin no more. An ideal put to Christians by Paul is to live out true love of God and neighbour and thereby be freed from the pains of conscience resulting from any wrong doing. One who habitually truly loves implements the law without explicitly thinking of observing it: “The only thing you should owe to anyone is love for another, for to love the other person is to fulfil the law. All these: You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet, and all the other commandments that there are, are summed up in this single phrase: You must love your neighbour as yourself. Love can cause no harm to your neighbour, and so love is the fulfilment of the Law” (Rom 13: 8-9).

One who knows that all foods are clean should abstain from eating such food when dining with others who falsely believe their food is unclean: this could lead a fellow Christian to sin. In Paul’s words: “But if someone says to you, ‘this food has been offered in sacrifice’ do not eat it, out of consideration for the person that told you, for conscience’s sake – not your own conscience, I mean, but the other person’s” (I Cor 10:28-29). Paul explains: “So, sinning against your brothers and wounding their vulnerable consciences, you would be sinning against Christ” (I Cor 8:12).

Conclusion

Paul built on what the Ancient Greeks already understood by conscience along with its presuppositions of the divine and an ordered universe. In Christianity, the presuppositions changed to a firm belief in a personal God who is the Creator of the universe and the Father who sent His only Son Jesus Christ, to be the Saviour of humanity by his suffering, death and resurrection. Paul is well aware that the Gentiles, having no excuse for their wrong doing, would not escape punishment: “The retribution of God from heaven is being revealed against the ungodliness and injustice of human beings who in their injustice hold back the truth. For what can be known about God is perfectly plain to them, since God has made it plain to them: ever since the beginning

of the world, the invisible existence of God and his everlasting power have been clearly seen by the mind’s understanding of created things. … In other words, since they would not consent to acknowledge God, God abandoned them to their unacceptable thoughts and indecent behaviour.” (Rom. 1.18-20; 28) Paul was aware that the Gentiles knew of moral standards, in some ways similar to those of the Jews enshrined in their Commandments. Their discussions among themselves on moral matters is evidence that they knew of the basic moral principles.

**Question for readers**

Why did St Paul and other New Testament authors develop the Greek understanding of conscience into the way Jesus Christ would have us see life, actions and other persons under the guidance and the influence of the Spirit of Christ?

6. **Thomas Aquinas on conscience**

Almost two thousand years have passed since St. Paul and other authors wrote on conscience in the New Testament. As we have seen, the Greek term συνείδησις [syneidêsis] for conscience was translated as conscientia in Latin. This term was already well entrenched in the medieval Scholastic tradition before St Thomas Aquinas wrote on conscience. In its original meaning conscience “denotes knowledge ordered towards something, since it means knowledge-along-with-another. But applying knowledge to something is an act. So from the name it is clear conscience is an act.”

Dealing specifically with moral knowledge in the context of an action under consideration to be performed Aquinas defined conscience as “nothing other than the application of knowledge to a determinate deed.”

For Aquinas, conscience directs moral knowledge or a principle to a concrete action. This can be exercised in a variety of ways, some of which are mentioned by Aquinas: they may be found in popular Greek discourse and also in New Testament writings, especially in the letters of Paul: “Conscience is said to witness, to bind, to incite, and also to accuse, to torment or to rebuke. And all these depend on applying some of our knowledge to what we are doing.”

The knowledge involved in an act of conscience may forbid one to do a bad action or command one to perform a good action.

Aquinas holds that one is morally bound to follow one’s conscience, understood more strictly as a judgement on any concrete proposal at hand: “Knowledge is in the reason. Consequently an act of the will disagreeing with reason is against conscience. Every such act is bad. ….Therefore an act of will disagreeing with a mistaken conscience is bad.” Aquinas is right. There is a strong assumption that the judgements of conscience of most people are correct: even one with a mistaken conscience believes it

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97 S.T. I-II, 19, a 5.c.

98 I 79, 13 c. This is exemplified as follows: “This application is threefold. First, in that we acknowledge that we have done something, or not done something … In this case conscience is said to witness. Knowledge is applied in a second way when through our conscience we judge that something ought to be done or ought not to be done. In this case conscience is said to incite or bind. A third application is when by conscience we judge something already done to have been done well or ill. In this case we speak of conscience excusing or accusing or tormenting.”

99 S.T. 1-2, 19 a 5 c
is correct. Smith agrees with the approach of Aquinas who “trusted conscience to move people towards acts that would, at least for the most part, be congruent with the absolute and universal principles of the first order (synderesis) such as ‘the good is to be done and pursued and evil avoided’.

Aquinas is aware that conscience applies moral knowledge to a concrete action and follows up with a judgement: do it or don’t do it. He realises there must be a natural source of awareness of first or basic moral principles in the light of which conscience makes a moral evaluation which culminates in a judgement for a proposed concrete action. We need to recall that the original meaning of *syneidēsis* is ‘a looking at together’. Our intellect or reason ‘looks at together’ its habitually present first moral principles and each proposal for action here and now. Hence Aquinas could not consistently use the same word ‘conscience’ to refer to this natural source of first moral principles. It appears that before ‘conscientia’ was used, the term ‘synteresis’ was originally used in Latin to translate the New Testament term for conscience *syneidēsis*. Eventually, ‘synteresis’ changed to become the Latin term ‘synderesis’, probably by an error in the copying of the Greek term *syneidēsis*. Aquinas took advantage of the situation and systematically used synderesis to refer to the intuitive knowledge of the first principles for practical reason, i.e. the first or basic moral principles for the guidance of conscience in judging concrete human actions. As Aquinas puts it: “The principles our nature imparts to us in practical matters do not belong to a special power, but to a special habit there by nature, synderesis. And thus, synderesis is said to incite us to good and to deter [Latin *murmurare*] us from evil in that through first principles we both begin investigation and judge what we find.”

Aquinas does not spell out these first principles in detail, but they would include the very first one: “good should be pursued and evil avoided” and also presumably murder, adultery and theft. Aquinas says: “Synderesis is called the law of our understanding in as much as it is the habit of keeping the principles of natural law, which are the first principles of human activity.” Through synderesis a person’s conscience is enabled and ready to apply its principles as required in daily life. He points out that as distinct from its secondary precepts, “The first principles of natural law are altogether unalterable”. However, he admits natural law can be modified by divine law or direct commands.

Aquinas compares how human theoretical reason operates in acquiring basic knowledge of the real world. We communicate and obviously understand each other when we talk of different kinds of trees and breeds of dogs. This would not be possible unless, say, a pine tree could not at the same time be an apple tree. We know that something cannot both be and not be in the same sense and at the same time. We operate in the light of this formal principle in all our statements, without thinking about it. The truth of this first principle of theoretical reason concerning reality is presupposed in, and formally guides, all our thinking and factual communications about things in the real world. He says something similar applies when we are dealing with our practical reason in doing

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100 Smith, *Conscience and Catholicism*, 15.
102 S.T. I, 79, 12 c.
103 S.T. I-II, 94, a 1 ad 2.
104 S.T. I-2, 94, 5c.
105 S-T I-II 94, a 5 c.
things. When people of sound mind do something, they have a good purpose, or what seems to be a good purpose, in mind and this guides them through whatever they do.

Aquinas applies this sort of reasoning to explain how we act in pursuit of good things, ends or purposes – the contrary being bad deeds, ends or purposes: “As to be real first enters into human apprehending as such, so to be good first enters into practical reason’s apprehending when it is bent on doing something. For every agent acts on account of an end, and to be an end carries the meaning of to be good. Consequently the first principle for the practical reason is based on the meaning of good, namely that it is what all things seek after. And so this is the first command of law ‘that the good is to be sought and done, and evil to be avoided’; all other commands of natural law are based on this. Accordingly, then, natural-law commands extend to all doing or avoiding of things recognized by the practical reason of itself as being human goods.”

Aquinas moves on to explain the difference between doing something good and something bad, something that is good for us in that it is in accord with our natural inclinations and its contrary which is not good, something that is not in accord with our natural inclinations and make-up: “Now since being good has the meaning of being an end, while being an evil has the contrary meaning, it follows that reason of its nature apprehends the things towards which man has a natural tendency as good objectives, and therefore to be actively pursued, whereas it apprehends their contraries as bad, and therefore to be shunned.” Obviously, in practice, synderesis is at work in this scenario supplying practical reason with its habitually present first moral principles, ever at hand to be applied to whatever actions are to be morally evaluated. Aquinas elaborates on this rationale with this explanation: “In the practical reason certain naturally evident principles pre-exist, which are the ends of the moral virtues – for, as we have noted, the end in matters of practice operates like a first principle in matters of theory – and in addition there are also judgments by way of conclusions about the things to be done for the sake of ends, arrived at in the light of those ends.”

**Erroneous conscience**

When a person’s will is confronted with a judgement of conscience commanding something to be done or avoided, the person is bound to act according to conscience. But if a person’s conscience is mistaken, should conscience still be obeyed? The person only knows what is presented by conscience and is not aware of any mistake at the time. For Aquinas, the conclusion is clear: the person is bound to act according to the dictate of conscience, as we have seen above: “Knowledge is in the reason. Consequently an act of will disagreeing with reason is against conscience. Every such act is bad. … Therefore an act of will disagreeing with a mistaken conscience is bad.” In other words, one is morally bound to follow conscience by not doing an objectively good action if one mistakenly believes, in good faith, that it is bad: “an act of will disagreeing with a mistaken conscience is bad.”

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106 S.T 1-2, 94, a 2 c. ‘of itself’ for the Latin ‘naturaliter’.
107 S.T. 1-2, 94, a 2 c
108 S.T. II-II, 47, a 6 c.
109 S.T. 1-2, 19 a 5 c.
110 S.T. 1-2, 19 a 5 c.
Furthermore, Aquinas argues that if a person’s conscience judges a proposed action as bad, the dictate of conscience to avoid the action is morally binding, even if the action in question happens to be objectively good: “Now because the objective of an act of the will is … something proposed to it by the reason, then if it be presented as something bad the will in reaching for it accepts this character of evil.”\textsuperscript{111} He puts it even more succinctly: “every act of the will against reason, whether in the right or in the wrong, is always bad.”\textsuperscript{112} Clearly Aquinas uses ‘bad’ in a subjective meaning here.

**Conscience and culpability**

Aquinas links moral culpability with the voluntariness of an agent’s action. In general, one who, without fault, is entirely unaware that an action deemed by conscience to be good, in fact is objectively morally wrong, is free from moral culpability in doing it: a bad action would not be willed. However, if a man with a mistaken conscience wills to commit adultery, Aquinas says “his consenting so to act will be bad, for his ignorance arises from a law of God he ought to recognize.”\textsuperscript{113} Apparently he believes any reasonable human being should know that adultery is morally wrong and could not inculpably be unaware of this.\textsuperscript{114} On the other hand, in the case of an honest mistaken identity, a man who seriously but mistakenly, believes a woman to be his wife and willingly agrees to have sexual intercourse with her “is exempt from evil, since his mistake arises from ignorance of a circumstance which excuses and renders his act involuntary” in relation to formal adultery.\textsuperscript{115} It is to be noted that Aquinas rightly refrains from saying the deed is good, limiting himself to saying it is “exempt from evil” or ‘blameless’.\textsuperscript{116}

If one’s ignorance is willed as a result of neglect of due diligence, then the mistaken conscience would be willed, at least more or less indirectly, and thereby makes the action bad to some degree and its agent accordingly morally responsible for the evil caused. Aquinas explains: “Now because moral good and evil lie in an activity in so far as it is voluntary, … clearly the sort of ignorance that causes an act to be involuntary takes away the character of moral good and evil; not so, however, the sort of ignorance that does not cause an act to be involuntary, namely, … the ignorance that in some manner is willed, whether directly or indirectly. We say that ignorance is directly voluntary when it is directly intended by the will, and indirectly voluntary when from negligence a person does not will to know what he ought to know.”\textsuperscript{117} He then puts it more succinctly: “Hence for anything on which the will is bent to be called bad, it is enough for it to be either really bad objectively or apprehended as bad. For it to be

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., S.T. 1-2, 19 a 5.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., S.T. 1-2, 19 a 5.
\textsuperscript{113} S.T. I-II, 19, 6c.
\textsuperscript{114} See S.T. I-II, 6, 8c. “Negatively, ignorance may be voluntary in the way … that not willing and not acting can be voluntary: it is an ignorance of what we can and should know.”
\textsuperscript{115} S.T. I-II, 19, 6c.
\textsuperscript{117} S.T. I-II, 19, 6 c. Aquinas then summarises his text: “If, then, the reason or conscience is mistaken through voluntary error, whether directly or from negligence, then, because it is on a matter a person ought to know about, it does not excuse the will from evil in following the reason or conscience thus going astray… If, however, it be an error rising from ignorance of some circumstance without any negligence that makes the act involuntary, then it excuses, so that the corresponding act is not bad.” See also S.T. I-II, 6, 8c, quote in note 67.
good, it must be good in both ways.”

Here he confirms that an objectively bad deed done with a mistaken conscience could not be a true good, an objective good, even though it is blameless subjectively.

Smith sums it up well: “Aquinas considered synderesis a habit or disposition of the first principles of practical reason that are known intuitively and/or prerationally known because they are imparted by nature. These are self-evident, nondebatable, and necessary…. Aquinas – for whatever or for no reason – never precisely detailed or explicitly specified what these first principles of practical reason are. The most we get from him is the well known: do and pursue the good, avoid evil.”

*Question for readers*

Why is synderesis needed for conscience to function?
What sort of ignorance can make an action culpable?

**John Henry Newman**

**Conscience as relationship with God**

For Newman, the basic meaning of conscience is an experience of the relationship between oneself and God, and this results in an awareness of fundamental moral principles that guide us in our deliberations along the right path of doing good. This differs from conscience simply providing judgements on individual acts that we are accustomed to: it is closer to St Paul’s views on conscience under the ongoing influence of the Gospels, other New Testament writings and of the Holy Spirit, as we have seen above. Conscience, for him provides a defence against the dangerous tenets of nineteenth century Liberalism, which in academic circles, exaggerated the importance of freedom, autonomy and downplayed the role of the authority of the Word of God in people’s moral lives. For Newman, conscience resembles God’s guiding voice in the core of our being.

Newman scholar, Fabio Attard says: “The reference to ‘conscience’ is one which points towards a relationship – *myself and my Creator*… he understands conscience not as a faculty providing him with information, as to what needs to be done or not done in the here and now, but rather as a *guardian, faithful* to the truth and *vigilant* because of the dangers he may encounter in discovering the principles of religion. It is in reality a discovery not of a word, but of an experience.” He goes on to add: “In affirming and accepting the voice of conscience as a first principle, both intellectual and divine, Newman overrides the challenge presented by the liberal idea, which highlights the human at the expense of the divine.”

Attard notes the important rift that continues to exist between the liberal and religious view of the world. Newman would never abandon conscience in favour of liberal attitudes to reason alone. He does this, however, without “sacrificing reason at the altar.

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118 S.T. 1-2, q 19, 6, ad 1. The Latin for objectively is *secundum suam naturam*.
119 Smith, *Conscience and Catholicism*, 17
He was determined to give primacy to “notions, beliefs, principles and convictions over events.” Newman shows he disagrees with the attitudes of some of his contemporaries: “When men advocate the rights of conscience …[they mean] the right of thinking, speaking, writing, acting, according to their judgement or humour without any thought of God at all. … Conscience has rights because it has duties; but in this age, with a large portion of the public, it is the very right and freedom of conscience to dispense with conscience, to ignore a Law-giver and Judge, to be independent of unseen obligations.”

Newman’s views on conscience can be grasped from a few quotations from his works, beginning with his Letter to the Duke of Norfolk: “The sense of right and wrong, which is the first element in religion, is so delicate, so fitful, so easily puzzled, obscured, perverted, so subtle, in its argumentative methods, so impressionable by education, so biased by pride and passion, so unsteady in its course, that, in the struggle for existence amid the various exercises and triumphs of the human intellect, this sense is at once the highest of all teachers, yet the least luminous: and the Church, the Pope and the Hierarchy are, in the divine purpose, the supply of an urgent demand”

**Centrality of truth for conscience**

Newman was well aware that human beings are not infallible, even when they are certain. He knew that we are morally bound to obey a certain conscience: “It may be objected, indeed, that conscience is not infallible; it is true, but still it is ever to be obeyed.” He nevertheless held that following a certain conscience was always right and beneficial: “I have always contended that obedience even to an erring conscience was the way to gain light.” He was keenly aware of the fundamental importance of truth for conscience and our moral life: “the most acute of reasoners and most profound of thinkers, the most instructed in earthly knowledge, is nothing, except he has also within him the presence of the Spirit of truth.” He once said: “No one who does not seek the truth with all his heart and strength, can tell what is of importance and what is not.” … it is to us a solemn practical concern not to turn away our ears from the truth.

Newman was convinced that “Obedience to the Pope is what is called ‘in possession’; that is, the onus probandi[ of proof] of establishing a case against him, lies, as in all cases of exception, on the side of conscience. Unless a man is able to say to himself as in the presence of God, that he must not, and dare not, act upon the papal injunction, he is bound to obey it, and would commit a great sin by disobeying it.” After a discussion on a related matter, Newman made a statement that ever evokes his name: “I add one remark. Certainly, if I am obliged to bring religion into after-dinner toasts,

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124 Attard, *Conscience in the Parochial and Plain Sermons*, 109
Cardinal Ratzinger, before becoming Pope XVI made two comments on Newman that are relevant and laudatory: “Newman embraced an interpretation of the papacy, which is only then correctly conceived when it is viewed together with the primacy of conscience – a papacy not put in opposition to the primacy of conscience but based on it and guaranteeing it.”133 The following citation followed soon after: “The centrality of the concept of conscience for Newman is linked to the prior centrality of the concept of truth and can only be understood from this vantage point.”134 The Cardinal returned to this theme later in his talk to complete his reflection: “The pope does not impose from without. Rather he elucidates the Christian memory and defends it. For this reason the toast to conscience indeed must precede the toast to the pope because without conscience there would not be a papacy. All power that the papacy has is the power of conscience.”135

**Conscience in a natural and revealed religion**

Before divine revelation was given to humanity, people had to rely on reason alone to solve moral problems. No doubt, some people would have been able to come to a rational belief in a God as the Creator of the universe, and indeed arrive at the conclusion that God is personal. Where a group of people believed in God as Creator, they may have understood they owed respect and thanks to God for their continued existence. This would be termed natural religion, and conscience, in the eventuality, would dictate how respect and worship should be shown to God. This sort of scenario would explain what Newman referred to in this extract: “As the essence of all religion is authority and obedience, so the distinction between natural religion and revealed lies in this, that one has a subjective authority, and the other an objective. ... The supremacy of conscience is the essence of natural religion: the supremacy of Apostle, or Pope or Church, or Bishop, is the essence of revealed; and when such external authority is taken away, the mind falls back again of necessity on that inward guide which is possessed even before revelation was vouchsafed.”136

Taste in respect of a work of art is directly experienced as pleasant or unpleasant: there is no authority to tell people which painting is the most beautiful; everyone could reasonably have a different opinion. Newman does not accept applying this scenario to morality. We know our conscience does not function as does taste when judging artistic objects -- say paintings. When it comes to judging our behaviour we trust our conscience, which in turn relies on something more than a personal opinion. He may, or may not, not have known of synderesis, but in the next passage it seems he was searching for something within us that could give a moral directive and not just a moral opinion as taste would: “Conscience does not repose on itself but vaguely reaches forward to something beyond self, and dimly discerns a sanction higher than self for its decisions, as is evidenced in that keen sense of obligation and responsibility which informs them. And hence it is that we are accustomed to speak of conscience as a

voice, a term which we would never think of applying to the sense of the beautiful; and moreover a voice, or the echo of a voice, imperative and constraining, like no other dictate in the whole of our experience.”

*Question for readers*

Do you think Newman’s approach to conscience closer to that of the New Testament writers, especially St Paul, than to St Thomas Aquinas?

8. Catholic teaching on conscience

Many people are unaware of the official teaching of the Church on conscience. Here I simple quote some important and authoritative text containing Catholic teaching on conscience.

First Vatican Council - Church in the Modern World

“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 conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: 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. (9) Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths. (10) In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbour. (11) 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 from social relationships. Hence the more right conscience holds sway, the more persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and strive to be guided by the objective norms of morality. Conscience frequently errs from invincible ignorance without losing its dignity. The same cannot be said for a man who cares but little for truth and goodness, or for a conscience which by degrees grows practically sightless as a result of habitual sin.” (N. 16)

“Only in freedom can man direct himself toward goodness. … Hence man's dignity demands that he act according to a knowing and free choice that is personally motivated and prompted from within, not under blind internal impulse nor by mere external pressure. Man achieves such dignity when, emancipating himself from all captivity to passion, he pursues his goal in a spontaneous choice of what is good, and procures for himself through effective and skilful action, apt helps to that end. Since man's freedom has been damaged by sin, only by the aid of God's grace can he bring such a relationship with God into full flower. Before the judgement seat of God each man must render an account of his own life, whether he has done good or evil” (N.17)

Pope Paul VI

“Conscience is the interpreter of an interior and superior standard (norma), which it does not create by itself” Conscience is enlightened by the intuition of certain normative principles inborn in human reason.” 138 This is quite reminiscent of Aquinas’ views on the source of acts of conscience.

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Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor: Church’s moral teaching*

*The judgment of conscience*

“The judgment of conscience is a practical judgment, a judgment which makes known what man must do or not do, or which assesses an act already performed by him. It is a judgment which applies to a concrete situation the rational conviction that one must love and do good and avoid evil. This first principle of practical reason is part of the natural law; indeed it constitutes the very foundation of the natural law, inasmuch as it expresses that primordial insight about good and evil, that reflection of God’s creative wisdom which, like an imperishable spark (*scintilla animae*), shines in the heart of every man. But whereas the natural law discloses the objective and universal demands of the moral good, conscience is the application of the law to a particular case; this application of the law thus becomes an inner dictate for the individual, a summons to do what is good in this particular situation. Conscience thus formulates moral obligation in the light of the natural law: it is the obligation to do what the individual, through the workings of his conscience, knows to be a good he is called to do here and now.” (N. 59)

“If man acts against this judgment or, in a case where he lacks certainty about the rightness of goodness of a determined act, he stands condemned by his own conscience, the proximate norm of personal morality.” (N.60)

*Seeking what is true and good*

“The Council reminds us that in cases where such invincible ignorance is not culpable, conscience does not lose its dignity, because even when it directs us to act in a way not in conformity with the objective moral order, it continues to speak in the name of that truth about the good which the subject is called to seek sincerely.”( N. 62)

“Conscience, as the ultimate concrete judgment, compromises its dignity when it is culpably erroneous, that is to say, "when man shows little concern for seeking what is true and good, and conscience gradually becomes almost blind from being accustomed to sin” (N.63)

“It is the ‘heart’ converted to the Lord and to the love of what is good which is really the source of true judgments of conscience. Indeed, in order to "prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (*Rom* 12:2), knowledge of God's law in general is certainly necessary, but it is not sufficient: what is essential is a sort of "connaturality" between man and the true good. Such connaturality is rooted in and develops through the virtuous attitudes of the individual himself: prudence and the other cardinal virtues, and even before these the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. This is the meaning of Jesus' saying: "He who does what is true comes to the light" (*Jn* 3:21). … “freedom of conscience is never freedom ‘from’ the truth but always and only freedom "in" the truth.”” (N.64)

*Catechism of the Catholic Church  Vatican 1994 3rd Print with Corrigenda incorporated*
faithfully what he knows to be just and right. It is by the judgment of his conscience that man perceives and recognizes the prescriptions of the divine law.”

1782 “Man has the right to act in conscience and in freedom so as personally to make moral decisions. "He must not be forced to act contrary to his conscience. Nor must he be prevented from acting according to his conscience, especially in religious matters.”

1780 “The dignity of the human person implies and requires uprightness of moral conscience. Conscience includes the perception of the principles of morality (synderesis); their application in the given circumstances by practical discernment of reasons and goods; and finally judgment about concrete acts yet to be performed or already performed. The truth about the moral good, stated in the law of reason, is recognized practically and concretely by the prudent judgment of conscience. We call that man prudent who chooses in conformity with this judgment.”

1790 “A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were deliberately to act against it, he would condemn himself. Yet it can happen that moral conscience remains in ignorance and makes erroneous judgments about acts to be performed or already committed.”

1800 “A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience.”

Catholic teaching and lay Catholics

The clergy learn what they need to know about Catholic moral theology during their studies when they were seminarians. Most lay Catholics have not had any formation in Catholic moral teaching, including conscience. I hope this small book helps to bridge this gap to some extent. Catholic teaching holds the judgements of conscience in high regard. Its imperatives must be followed, even if they happen to be erroneous in good faith. The formation of the conscience of a Christian does not automatically happen. Catholic Christian lay people need to have their consciences formed by a study of Christian sources beginning from the written Word God in the Scriptures -- the Gospels and the writings of both the New and Old Testaments, Tradition and Catholic teaching. Christians from the beginning had the apostles and others appointed by them to be their bishops to help them as pastors to teach them faith and morals and so help them form their consciences. The Popes and local Bishops have safeguarded Catholic Christian moral teaching, drawn from the Bible and Tradition, and have passed it on to Christians everywhere, up to the present times. Lay Catholics today need help and guidance to form their consciences in our contemporary world more than ever before, granted the powerful influence of secular ethics worldwide with the support of secular media as well.

With the arrival of printing and electronic means of social communications the task of teaching Christian doctrine and morals has been made easier, but living teachers are still needed to complement the work done by the Pope and local Bishops. The publication of the Catechism of the Catholic Church is an excellent resource to find Catholic moral teaching on most issues. Still some explanations are needed. These, hopefully, are given in Catholic primary and secondary schools but not all Catholic children can attend Catholic schools. Adult education is required for the formation of the consciences of the others and to supplement what Catholic schools gave their former students. Tertiary Catholic colleges need to continue this mission for the ever expanding numbers of Catholic lay professionals working in health care, teaching, and other professions, not to
mention Catholics interested in politics and other careers. An increasing number of lay people wish to become acquainted with Catholic teachings that are relevant to their special interests. Ultimately Catholic lay people need to have the Catholic moral tradition handed on to them if they are to form their consciences as Catholic Christians. The Second Vatican Council made this very clear:

“In the formation of their consciences, the Christian faithful ought carefully to attend to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church. (35) The Church is, by the will of Christ, the teacher of the truth. It is her duty to give utterance to, and authoritatively to teach, that Truth which is Christ Himself, and also to declare and confirm by her authority those principles of the moral order which have their origins in human nature itself.”

This message is endorsed elsewhere by the same Council:

“Bishops who teach in communion with the Roman Pontiff are to be revered by all as witnesses of divine and Catholic truth; the faithful, for their part, are obliged to submit to their bishops’ decision, made in the name of Christ, in matters of faith and morals, and to adhere to it with a ready and respectful allegiance of mind. This loyal submission of the will and intellect must be given, in a special way, to the teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff…”

Catholics are obliged to abide by a certain judgement of an informed conscience even if they are aware that what they are about to do is contrary to Catholic teaching. They should quietly pray, study and reflect on their position and should avoid giving scandal to their friends or the community. A Catholic in such a situation has no moral right to engage in public dissent from authentic Catholic teaching nor to teach others to disregard the Church’s moral teachings to the detriment of the formation of their consciences and the building up of the community of the faithful, Christ’s body.

Bishops and pastors need to stress the relevant moral principles in the light of which Catholic professionals and lay people are to make their own decisions following their own consciences. Admittedly, this presupposes Catholic lay people are sufficiently informed on the basic principles of Catholic morality. Whenever and wherever ambiguity openly rises, the Church should intervene and teach moral truths to help the faithful understand moral principles correctly so that their judgements of conscience may be truly formed. Where the moral protection of the lives of unborn children or other matters of justice are at stake, Church authorities should be courageous in making public statements to educate Catholic lay people and others on such important moral issues for the common good as well as to influence public policy for the better. In regard to the political sphere proper, most Catholics should be able to morally evaluate the likely consequences of any proposed legislation or regulations touching on the common good of all in the community. It is to be stressed, however, that in the political sphere Catholic citizens have the right to the free exercise of political discretion in a morally responsible way.

Questions for readers

140 Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, N. 24.
What reasons could you give to explain why a good Catholic could sometimes disagree with Catholic teaching on a moral issue? When would a good Catholic be at fault in disagreeing with Catholic teaching on a moral issue? If this person were your friend, what advice would you give if asked?

9. Bernard Häring on Christian dignity and freedom of conscience

Bernard Häring is one of the great moral theologians who took up the spirit and challenge given by the Second Vatican Council to the Church, the People of God, in Rome, 7 December 1965. In relation to the study of moral theology for candidates to the priesthood the Council stipulated that “Its scientific presentation should draw more fully on the teaching of holy Scripture and should throw light on the exalted vocation of the faithful in Christ and their obligation to bring forth fruit in charity for the life of the world.” Text books needed to change from a casuistic and legalistic approach to one focussed on biblical foundations and the calling of Christians to live and act like Christ as portrayed in the Gospels and other New Testament writings — in short, a life based on the love of God and of neighbour.

Unity of conscience and will in the person

Häring responded to this major challenge as a professional not only in his lectures but especially in his reader friendly books on moral theology. As an eminent author and teacher of moral theology, he emphasised the human person’s dignity, and the integral unity of conscience and will inherent in each person’s rational nature. He elaborates: “God has endowed us with moral faculties. He established the order of nature which by use of the natural power of our intelligence we can grasp and understand as obliging and binding us. In fact, God has bound us up with it through our whole being.”

Häring shows his agreement with Aquinas when he says: “It is the proper task of conscience to move the will in accordance with the truth of which it is aware and to search for the truth prior to its decision.” He holds that conscience and the will belong “together in the deepest reaches of our psychic and spiritual life.” He sees conscience related to the person’s selfhood: “The intellectual, volitional and emotional dynamics are not separated: they mutually compenetrate (sic) in the very depth where the person is person to himself.” Though intimately linked and in dynamic relationships with each other, he admits they are not one and the same: “Even though in the depths of the human spirit, intellect and will are somehow distinct, they cannot really thrive without each other.”

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145 Häring, Free and Faithful, 235
146 Häring, Free and Faithful, 235
Reminiscent of the meaning of the Greek term *syneidēsis*, conscience, so often used by Paul, Häring illustrates the importance of this natural unity by the effects of its breakdown: “The person suffers in his whole being if there arises a kind of split into two different selves, the true self that longs for wholeness and truth and the selfish self that seeks a mere image of the good. As root and source of unity of all one’s powers, the depth of the soul is tortured, torn by the dissention. Here is the profound reason for the first elemental agony of conscience, a spontaneous unreflected pain.”  

Furthermore, granted the vital importance of the intimate links between conscience and will within the person for human wellbeing, it would be natural to expect signs of harm within ourselves if they were subject to some let-down or malfunction resulting from their failure to be in harmony with one another. Häring is well aware of the risks: “Once we have realized that conscience is the inner core, the deepest wellspring of integration and wholeness, it becomes evident that many forms of mental and physical unhealthiness are caused by a corrupted conscience.”  

**Natural law**

In general terms, Häring, accepts that natural law can provide a foundation for morality provided due account is taken of “the human person in all his or her relationships and in the concrete historical order” including “man’s innermost longing for wholeness in his own faculties, and wholeness and integrity in his relationships with God, his fellowmen and the world around him.” He insists that natural law morality cannot ignore the importance of the rational, relational and social nature of all human beings, their need for the exercise of free will and their social obligations towards each other. Human nature is endowed with the capacity to understand and to reason, to exercise acts of free will in association with our affections, emotions and passions at times, as well as enjoying an inborn sense of humour, play, beauty and joy as expression of ourselves as social beings. However, these aspects of human nature are exercised quite differently according to the times, places and social institutions.

Häring is well aware that whilst all peoples are rational by nature, the expression of their rational activities varies in different nations, cultures, and especially historical times. Today we are more aware of other cultures and at the same time we are becoming more tolerant of other peoples’ ways of living, thinking and self-expression. We should also respect and learn to accept the conscientious judgements of people from other cultures. It is well known that “Not all cultures have given the same attention and evaluation to affectivity, emotions and passions. … Diversity of expression is natural for historical man.” Consciences of all persons in diverse lands and times will naturally be more or less conditioned by their cultures in their moral evaluation of choices in life. It is reasonable, then, to claim that natural law has developed somewhat throughout history, according to times, cultures and places.

147 Häring, *Free and Faithful*, 236.
148 Häring, *Free and Faithful*, 259.
152 See Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, 321-24 for more excellent ideas on this theme.
Recognition of some human rights has taken centuries – think how long it took to have slavery abolished worldwide. Häring attributes this long delay to a lack of docility to the Spirit which blinded Westerners, even those with an upright conscience, to the evil of slavery. It is important to bear in mind that culture, continues to make an enormous impact on the outcome of the judgements of conscience, even of sincere moral agents. Häring, however, admits that natural law “does not entail an unlimited relativism. We always insist that man has to discover what is good and evil; he cannot determine it arbitrarily, there are abiding truths.”

**Dignity of Christian conscience**

Häring allows for divinely revealed truths to make their impact on human beings’ ways of thinking and hence ultimately on their judgements of conscience: “Christ has restored the original nature which is a graced nature… He [came] to restore, confirm and bring to fullness the original design of God.” Häring ultimately accepts that our rational nature is the source of our moral obligations and Christian obligations through the gift of God in his Son Jesus Christ: “St Thomas Aquinas synthesizes the best of our tradition when he says that neither the new law promulgated by Jesus Christ nor the natural law is imposed from without. Both are inborn laws that man discovers as his own, appeals to a good life that comes from within.” When people receive baptism they are endowed by divine grace with the new life of Christ. Through faith and grace Christ dwelling in us enlightens our conscience and helps us to live by it.

Faith is God’s great gift to all believers in Christ, willingly received and appreciated, enabling them through Christ and in the Holy Spirit, to relate as adopted children with God their Father. Faith enlightens and enables their conscience on the pathway of freely choosing to live out the Gospels in acts of love of God and neighbour. Paul wrote to the Romans, “You are living, not under law, but under grace” (Rom 6:14). Häring reminds us that “Whoever has quenched the light that comes from within, and has allowed his will and intelligence to disintegrate through indulgence of the selfish self, has a corrupted conscience.”

Häring insists all should seek to acquire maturity in themselves, their faith and conscience: “A mature Christian conscience will not think of faith as a catalogue of things and formulations. What shapes all moral dispositions, gives wholeness to conscience and firmness to the Christian’s fundamental option is the profound attitude of faith and its responsiveness. Faith is a profound relationship with Christ. …Faith can be defined as an all-embracing Christ-consciousness.” We need the support and Grace of the Holy Spirit to keep our Faith vibrant: “Openness to the Spirit guides the Christian conscience in the evaluation of every situation.”

Häring sees the need of the Church hierarchy to support the Christian community united in their faith: “Headed by the pope, bishops and theologians stand together in the service of the Word of God. All are guardians and promoters of the faith in mutual complementarity. They can be leaders of the people only if they are the most outstanding listeners, listening to the Word of God, listening to each other, listening to the faithful, especially to those who embody the moral and religious authority of life.

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154 See Häring, Free and Faithful in Christ, 328.
155 Häring, Free and Faithful in Christ, 323.
156 Häring, Free and Faithful in Christ, 327.
158 Häring, Free and Faithful in Christ, 259.
159 Häring, Free and Faithful in Christ, 248.
160 Häring, Free and Faithful in Christ, 250.
competence and experience, while listening always to the Spirit who prompts their hearts to search, in absolute sincerity, for truth." He adds a warning: "Nobody possesses a monopoly of truth, and nobody can hope to be inspired by the Spirit unless he honors the Holy Spirit who works in all for all." He admits, however, a necessary role for the Church hierarchy: "There must be the authority of those who teach and make decisions, and there must be a spirit of loyalty and obedience towards them." He lays out an ideal plan for the exercise of Church authority, all other things being equal: "The magisterium [teaching authority] of the Church, in all its forms, and on all levels, is authentic and faithful to Christ when the overriding concern is not for submission but for honesty, sincerity and responsibility." 

**Christian freedom of conscience**

The harmonious working together of conscience and will facilitates the building of an integrated faith which could eventually be harmed by an excessive emphasis on the control of doctrine coupled with a militant approach to theology: "Only a joyous sharing of faith and a building up of a profound disposition of faith can guarantee the synthesis between orthodoxy and orthopraxis that unites all believers in Christ." Much earlier Häring had written: "Freedom and obedience … are not contradictories: rather, they require one another and complement one another. Christian freedom lives from its union with obedience in faith. But in the same way obedience proceeds from the virtue of freedom." Sadly, a failure to appreciate this reality could be the source of unjustified acrimonious criticisms and unnecessary divisions amongst Christians at every level. Häring wisely remarks: "The legalist stands before an abstract law and will ever be tempted to get around it without a full commitment to the Lord, or else impose it ruthlessly on others, with no knowledge of salvation."

In defence of inherent human dignity and rights, Häring firmly states: "Any form of natural law theory that does not honor the freedom and dignity of the human person, any theory that submits the person, as such, to mere drives or other ‘sovereign masters’ is worth nothing or, rather, is inimical to ethics." He is aware that "Some oppressions that block the normal functioning of conscience and liberty can be due to oppressive authority." This remark could apply to parents, teachers, priests, and even some bishops, acting either publicly or in private. Häring’s advice is timely: "It would be a most serious fault against the dignity of conscience if a pastor, a confessor, or anyone else were to press the person to act against his sincere conscience, or indiscreetly try to inculcate the objective norm if this would disturb the person who simply cannot accept a particular precept or norm," provided of course there was no risk of harm to another. The Second Vatican Council did well to lay down that the teaching of moral theology be inspired more by the holy Scriptures. Jesus himself condemned a legalistic approach in living out our moral lives before God and ourselves.

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Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, 283
Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, 283
Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, 283
Häring, *Free and Faithful*, 249.
Häring, *Free and Faithful*, 250.
Häring, *Free and Faithful*, 262.
Together with St Paul and other New Testament writers, as we have seen above, Häring was a great champion of freedom of conscience. He rightly says: “The more the freedom of conscience is protected and promoted, the greater is the hope that people will truly live according to their conscience. Only for the sake of freedom, dignity and the rights of all can the state legitimately restrict people’s freedom.”¹⁷¹ He spells out his rationale for this “If God has risked creating us in freedom and for freedom, the Church has to do the same in fidelity to God. Only thus can she herself be enriched by creative fidelity and liberty.”¹⁷² He adds: “We are saved by a faith that implies a firm self-commitment to good and to God, and a sincere search for truth in order to act on it. Religious freedom has nothing to do with indifference in matters of morality or truth. Rather, it is an essential condition for the Christian’s commitment to give witness and win everyone for Christ, and to serve the salvation of all humankind.”¹⁷³ Indeed, without true freedom of conscience there can be no genuine religious practice.

Christians today live in a secular world where many things are valued that would count for little in a Gospel scale of values. Human beings’ appreciation of autonomy is not likely to diminish in the near future. However, autonomy need not be interpreted in an absolute sense as though it could, or should, trump all other values for individuals or society. If human autonomy were to be absolute the State could not make any binding laws for the common good. The reasonable exercise of autonomy and freedom are great gifts from God: they are our birthright. The right functioning of conscience requires effective freedom of citizens in society.

Indeed, Häring goes further: “Respect for conscience and religious liberty is a great service to the good of society and to peace on earth. Most political conflicts could easily be resolved peacefully if respect for these basic and most important rights reigned in all societies.”¹⁷⁴ Had freedom of conscience been universal in recent times extremism and terrorism may not have gained such strength world wide. Not all deeds that are immoral need to be made criminal. Häring was right to say: “Laws on moral matters are ineffective if they do not re-echo in people’s consciences.”¹⁷⁵

Finally in regard to the secular world he says “If Church authorities speak on matters concerning the secular city, they cannot impose their authority but can argue and try to convince the consciences of citizens and of the authorities in the secular city. They aim above all at educating the citizens’ consciences and respect for conscience itself. This is an important part of the social mission of the Church.”¹⁷⁶ Formation of conscience is indeed of paramount importance for the Church. To be effective in contemporary western society Häring supports a “moral education that focuses on responsibility and on creative liberty and fidelity.”¹⁷⁷

Erroneous conscience

Häring practically agrees with Aquinas on the issue of erroneous conscience and so there is no need to repeat their shared views. He realises how important the

¹⁷¹ Häring, Free and Faithful, 274
¹⁷² Häring, Free and Faithful in Christ, 276
¹⁷³ Häring, Free and Faithful in Christ, 276-7.
¹⁷⁴ Haring, Bernard, Free and Faithful in Christ, 275.
¹⁷⁵ Häring, Bernard, Free and Faithful in Christ, 275. Aquinas gives a hint he is of much the same mind: “Human law cannot forbid all that natural law forbids.” S.T. I-II, 96, a2 ad 3.
¹⁷⁶ Häring, Free and Faithful in Christ, 279
¹⁷⁷ Häring, Free and Faithful in Christ, 293
implication of Aquinas positions are for today’s religious and secular world. He believes it is a misfortune for one to have an erroneous conscience on a serious matter, “but it is much worse, a moral evil, if the conscience errs because of a lack of sincerity. The greatest evil is when the conscience becomes dull and sightless.”

It is necessary to distinguish between a mistaken judgement of conscience from the faculty or power of conscience concerning a moral truth. It is one thing for conscience to determine correctly that an act of adultery is immoral, and quite another to judge erroneously that a particular action is not adultery due to, say, a case of mistaken identity of the woman involved, as we saw above. Häring puts it this way: “Conscience itself as faculty or power cannot be erroneous, but its decisions may be in error. Conscience as vital power can be dulled, but it cannot err. With unerring certainty it calls out that the will and intellect of man must conform in action, as they are rooted together in being.” Häring points out that conscience in itself as a power is still upright but a matter of fact may not always be correct: “When a person is truly looking for what is good and right, there is a kind of indefectibility in the conscience. With unwavering certainty, it orders the will to conform with the intellect, following its light, as the two are rooted together at the core of one’s being. This imperative written in the heart, has moral majesty even though it may have a background of defective moral knowledge, indeed even if it makes a fully erroneous judgment.” Perhaps Häring may be thinking of synderesis rather than conscience itself.

To round it up Häring concludes: “We can apply the general criterion that a particular decision has the unconditioned dignity of a judgment of conscience if the person is sincerely seeking the truth and is ready to revise the decision as soon as he realizes that new pertinent questions call for his reconsideration. The sign of a truly conscientious decision is the inner peace and growing sensitivity to all new opportunities to do what love and justice demand.”

Conscience and charity

As discussed above when I wrote about the dispute involving St Paul over foods that had been offered up to false gods, Christians could eat such food because false gods do not exist. But if a Christian’s conscience mistakenly believes it is wrong to eat such foods, his fellow Christian companion ought also abstain out of respect for his Christian brother’s mistaken conscience -- to consume such food regardless of one’s brother’s predicament would be offensive towards the weaker and mistaken conscience of one’s brother in the faith. Häring quotes an example of Paul from his letter to the Romans: “It is for us who are strong to bear with the susceptibilities of the weaker ones, and not please ourselves. Each of us must consider his neighbour’s good, so that we support one another” (Rom 15:1-2). He re-enforces this stand with another text: “But if someone says to you, ‘This food has been offered in sacrifice,’ do not eat it, out of consideration for the person that told you, for conscience sake --- not your own conscience, I mean, but the other person’s” (I Cor. 10:29-30). Häring gives this as an example of ‘reciprocity of conscience’ at work. Christians should not follow their own conscience regardless of whether this may offend the conscience of a fellow believer: “It is evident that we cannot honor God from the depth of our conscience unless we are

\[178\] Häring, Free and Faithful in Christ, 240.
\[179\] Häring, The Law of Christ, 154; see also S.T. I-II, 19, 6c
\[180\] Häring, Free and Faithful in Christ, 240
\[181\] Häring, Free and Faithful in Christ, 242.
thankful but also respectful about the impact of our action on the wavering conscience of our fellowmen.”182 For the Christian, charity is the supreme virtue and it ought to direct one’s conscience in such cases. In practice we should always respect the mistaken conscience of neighbours and in due time, with all charity and kindness, enlighten or correct them without causing any offence.

Häring gives his readers a reminder that the world reached the stage of recognising the right of all persons to follow their conscience on 10 December 1948 when the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which included the following articles on freedom of religion and conscience.

Art. 18 “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

Art 30 “Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein.”183

Indeed error may not have rights, but the person whose conscience is in error does have rights. As we have seen above, it was only on 7 December 1965 that religious freedom for all was formally approved by the Second Vatican Council.

Häring comments that in the Constantinian era when the state and Church enjoyed the mutual support of one another, and the state “considered unity in faith and morals as one of its absolute foundations …it was almost normal that there would be more emphasis on objective truth and on conformity with the Church’s teaching than on the personal conscience…. Religion was somehow viewed as the common bond to a system of truths and an absolute allegiance to religious authority representing God on earth.”184 He then concludes on a hopeful note: “The Church now fully accepts the focus on the person and the reciprocity of consciences as a basis of community life and evangelization.”185

**Question for readers**

What implications follow on from the importance Häring gives to the unity of conscience and will in the human person?

Does emphasis on freedom of conscience promote disregard for moral obligations?

How should charity guide us in our dealings with others who are vulnerable and/or have an erroneous conscience?

10. **Conclusion**

The understanding of the term *syneidēsis* used in everyday language by the Ancient Greeks led to St Paul adopting and using this same term in his Letters. He gradually let the meaning of conscience be influenced by the reality and mystery of Jesus Christ, Son of God, who preached the Kingdom of God. Paul knew Jesus was totally dedicated to his Father’s will and obediently accepted to endure sufferings and an ignominious death on the Cross for the salvation of humanity. Jesus asked his followers to likewise accept

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182 Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, 269
183 Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, 270.
his Father’s will. By the power of God Jesus rose from the dead alive, ascended into heaven to rejoin his Father and to send the Holy Spirit on the community of believers to continue Jesus’ mission to the end of the world.

The Spirit of Christ made a great impact on St Paul, to such an extent that his notion of conscience began to be infused by the promptings of Christ’s Spirit in his Letters and preaching. As human beings we should to live out Shakespeare’s injunction: “This above all: to thine own self be true”. We do this by following our own conscience. For Christians who pray devoutly and frequently Paul practically says the Spirit of Christ dwells in their souls, prompting their consciences to act in a Christ-like way, living out their faith and hope, ever practising charity and a readiness to forgive others.

In this way the good Christian identifies with Christ and thereby Shakespeare’s saying “to thine own self be true” acquires the new gifted meaning of being Christ-like in action, being in fact true to Christ in our lives. This is far from doing our own thing in the name of conscience. The Christian is given the gift and the challenge to freely choose to follow Christ in life, no doubt with the help and promptings of the indwelling Spirit of Christ.

Believers in Christ can learn much from Christ, “who fully reveals man to himself” for He is the “perfect Man” as the Second Vatican Council put it. Again the Council says: “Whoever follows Christ the perfect Man, becomes himself more a man.” Aware that the Father had planned our salvation and restoration well in advance, Häring encourages us to participate in the Father’s plan by conscientiously living out our faith with the grace of the Spirit of Christ dwelling within us: “Christ’s restoration is not the result of some dictate; it is an ongoing event that comes to completion through faith and grace.”

There is a need for practical action by way of making the mystery of Christ central to our educational endeavours as opportunities for moral education are provided, beginning with the basics of the Christian faith and morality and then to lay a firm foundation for the formation of people’s consciences suited to their employment and professional responsibilities. There should be proper respect shown for the Church’s teaching to enable it to have due influence in the formation of consciences without denying the legitimate need for freedom and the inviolability of each person’s own informed certain conscience.

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186 Shakespeare, William, *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, Act 1, sc. 3, 1.68
187 Vatican II Church in the Modern World n 22 and n 41
188 Vatican II Church in the Modern World n 41
189 Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, 327.