
What is the Conscience?

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'*What are conscience?*' is Pinocchio's question in the Walt Disney adaptation of Collodi's charming children's story. The grammar is wrong but the question is a good one. **What is the conscience?** Of course, we all have an idea of what conscience is. We all know we have one. We can think, perhaps, of the hard times it has given us. People say 'My conscience is playing on me' or 'My conscience pricked me'. We know what it is to have something 'on your conscience'. We know about a bad or guilty conscience and, hopefully, a good conscience too. However, as one writer points out, 'of the number that make use of the word nineteen in twenty perhaps may be ignorant of its true meaning.'¹ He is not exaggerating. Other words found in the Bible are used quite loosely. People still talk about 'living in sin' and use phrases like 'as ugly as sin' or 'more sinned against than sinning'. But how often is the word understood in its Biblical sense, the transgression of God's law? It is the same with the word conscience. The word is seldom used with any precision. In every day use it can have a range of meanings. We are all familiar with the word but how many of us have a carefully defined Biblical concept of what the conscience is? A survey of Biblical material relating to the conscience and an examination of the Greek word employed in the New Testament will enable us to attempt a Biblical definition.

The Old Testament

There is no actual reference to the conscience in the Old Testament.² The Hebrews did not seem to find it necessary to use such a term. This was probably because as God's chosen people they received direct revelation from God and so were not as immediately aware of conscience as the Gentiles. Old Testament believers spoke more readily of their hearts reflecting on revelation, as in the Psalms (see Psalms 16:7, 40:8 and 119:11). Nevertheless, the idea of conscience is certainly present in a number of places and some modern translations introduce the word at certain points. In the opening chapters of Genesis we read that Adam and Eve, following their disobedience, were ashamed of their nakedness and hid in fear at the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day (Genesis 3:8,10). What else is this but the earliest manifestation of man's conscience at work?

There are other places where the word *heart* clearly stands for the conscience. Thus in Genesis 20:5,6 the Gentile Abimelech speaks with God. '... I have done this with a clear conscience and clean hands.' Then God speaks to him in a dream, 'Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience, and so I have kept you from sinning against me.' (NKJV). We also read Job's words, 'I will maintain my righteousness and never let go of it; my conscience will not reproach me as long as I live.' (Job 27:6 NIV). On at least two occasions David's conscience is seen to be at work. 'And it came about afterwards that David's conscience bothered him because he had cut off the edge of Saul's robe.' (1 Samuel 24:5 NASB). Also 'David was conscience-stricken after he had counted the fighting men.' (2 Samuel 24:10 NIV), cf 1 Samuel 25:31.

Similarly in Psalms 32, 38 and 51 the conscience is active. Psalm 32:3,4 is descriptive of the pangs of a bad conscience, 'When I kept silent my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.' Psalm 38:3-5 is similar and Psalm 51:10 speaks of David's desire for a good conscience ('Create in me a pure heart, O God etc.'). It was on the basis that every man has a conscience that the Law was given and that the prophets preached. A striking example is the way in which Nathan dealt with David following his adultery with Bathsheba (1 Samuel 12). In the story of Joseph and his brothers the conscience plays an important role (see Genesis 42:21). 1 Kings 8:38; Job 4:16,17; Proverbs 20:27 and 28:1 and Ecclesiastes 7:22 are other places where some have detected possible references to the conscience.

The New Testament

In the Gospels there is no direct reference to conscience (excepting the questionable instance of John 8:9 where the word appears in some manuscripts). However, there is reason to believe that there were occasions when the conscience was in view. For example, in Luke 12:57 Jesus asks the people, 'Why don't you judge for yourselves what is right?'. This appeal is directed to the conscience. Similarly, some writers suggest that in Matthew 6:22,23 where Jesus refers to having a 'single eye' he is talking about the conscience. A pure heart must also be something similar to or allied with a clear conscience (Matthew 5:8). In Mark 3:5 Jesus rails at the 'stubborn hearts' or hardened consciences of the Pharisees. The meaning of John 1:9 is a matter of debate amongst Reformed and Evangelical writers but Calvin and others may well be right when they see conscience as at least partly the point of reference here. The bulk of direct New Testament references to conscience are found in Paul's letters. In fact, of the thirty or so uses of the word twenty are in his writings. Two others are found in speeches by him recorded in Acts and five are in the letter to the Hebrews which if not by Paul is certainly characteristic of him. The only other New Testament writer to use the word is Peter, in his first letter. It is, therefore, very much a Pauline word. But where did Paul get it from? At one time it was widely thought to be a specialist word taken from Stoic philosophy but it has now been demonstrated to have been an every day word going back, in one form or another, to at least the sixth century BC. It has been suggested that it was a 'catchword' amongst the Corinthian believers taken up by Paul and used not just in writing to them but, consequently, as part of his own Christian vocabulary.³ Certainly Paul and other New Testament writers were happy to take up words and fill them with Christian meaning. Peter does this in his letters more than once and Paul, for example, takes up the word Saviour (*soter*) in this way.

Like the Old Testament and the Gospels, the rest of the New Testament is perfectly able to speak about the conscience without using the word. For example in 1 John 3:19-21 the apostle uses the word *heart* where the word *conscience* would fit equally well. 'This then is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts (consciences) at rest in his presence whenever our hearts (consciences) condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts (consciences), and he knows everything.' However, in the writings of Peter and especially of Paul the word conscience itself is used.

Etymology

The Greek word is *suneidesis*. It is universally agreed that the word is made up of two parts. The first part (*sun*) means 'with' or 'together' (Cf the English words, *synchronised* or *symphony*). The second part (*eidesis*) is from one of the Greek words meaning 'to know'. The root meaning, therefore, is 'to know together' or 'joint knowledge' or 'knowledge shared (with another)'. The English word is from Latin and is made up in exactly the same way, *CON-SCIENTIA*. Some other modern European languages are similar. So in Welsh you have *CYD-WYBOD*, in Swedish *SAM-VETE* etc.

This does not bring us immediately to a Biblical definition. There has been much debate as to who shares this 'joint knowledge'. Obviously there is, on the one side, the person himself, but who is the other? Many have maintained that the other must be God. Conscience has been spoken of as 'The voice or oracle of God', 'The vicar of Christ' or even 'God's intimate presence in the soul'.⁴ Such phrases are often used on the basis that the etymology proves that what conscience reveals to a man's mind must be knowledge shared with God. Thus we have definitions like that of Aquinas and approved by the Puritan William Ames, 'a man's judgement of himself, according to the judgement of God of him'. Ames' tutor William Perkins is similar. He sees God and man as 'partners in the knowledge of one and the same secret'. Conscience is undoubtedly part of God's general revelation but to speak of it simply as God's voice agreeing with ours is potentially confusing.

Usage

It is unwise to base a definition of a word on etymology alone. The way a word is used matters much more. (September is not our seventh month. There is surely nothing sinister about left-handed people.) Scholars are not in total agreement about the usage of the word *suneidesis* and its family of related words. It is clear, nevertheless, that when the Greeks used this and related terms it was not always in the context of moral judgments. There is an example where Socrates' young disciple Alcibiades speaks of being conscious he could put up no resistance to the power of his teacher's arguments.⁵ There is no moral element here. Least of all, in Greek thought, is there any necessary connection between conscience and God.

In the New Testament we find a related word being used in a context where God is clearly not the one who shares the knowledge. In Acts 5:2 we read that 'with his wife's full knowledge' Ananias kept back money from the apostles while claiming it was being given over. The word used is *sunoida*, 'to know with another'. Ananias knew what he was doing and so did his wife. He knew with her.

Then in Acts 12:12 and 14:6 the NIV speaks of something 'dawning' on Peter and of Paul and Barnabas 'finding out about' a thing. Words from the same family are again used. Thus, at their most basic, these words can simply mean 'to become conscious of', 'to realise'. Most interesting in this connection is Hebrews 10:2. There the ASV speaks of worshippers who 'would have had no more consciousness of sins'. The word used is the same as that found in Hebrews 10:22, 'having our hearts sprinkled to save us from a guilty conscience' (NIV. Cf TCNT: '... purified by the sprinkled blood from all consciousness of wrong.') In Hebrews 10:2 it is really only the addition of the words 'for their sins' that brings in a moral element. At root the Greek word does not necessarily imply anything more than 'knowing'.

Complexity

Before we come to a formal definition perhaps we should warn against the temptation of thinking about the conscience simplistically. Whatever it is, the conscience is something complex. Recognising this, some of the Puritans allowed their imaginations free rein in order to describe the workings of conscience. William Perkins speaks of conscience being assisted by mind, the storehouse and keeper of rules and principles and by memory, the recaller of omissions and commissions. In *THE HOLY WAR* Bunyan is even more elaborate with Mr Conscience the Towncrier who goes mad. Richard Sibbes says, 'God hath set and planted in man this court of conscience, and it is God's hall, as it were, where he keeps his first judgement . . . his assizes. And conscience doth all the parts. It registereth, it witnesseth, it judgeth, it executes, it doth all.'⁶ Such pictures are helpful as long as we keep in mind the complex mysteries involved. The workings of conscience include the process of perceiving what is required, assessing this and then deciding how to proceed or what judgement to give on the subject. This culminates in an over-riding impression of 'ought' or 'ought not'. Although this may happen very quickly a host of mental perceptions and emotions are involved. For instance there is the comprehension of right and wrong; using the memory, mind and will; a resulting complacency, delight or pride, on the one hand, or disquiet, shame and pain on the other as reward or punishment is contemplated.

The breadth of mental and emotional interplay involved can be gauged from the variety of legitimate illustrations employed by different writers in their attempts to bring out the manifold character of conscience. These include spy, watchdog, monitor, bloodhound, window, skylight, mirror, pope, lash, sword, barometer, sundial, alarm clock, plumbline, sense of taste etc! These various illustrations highlight the fact that conscience cannot be thought of as a simple mechanism or reflex.

Definition

Now we come to a definition. It is clear that when the Bible speaks about the conscience it is really speaking about the heart or soul or spirit itself. More definitely, it is referring to a particular aspect of the soul or, better, the soul's workings. We should not think of the conscience as a department of man's personality or a faculty of his soul. It is useful to speak of it in these terms for the purposes of study but it is important to realise that the conscience is, in fact, simply one aspect of man's personality, one function of his soul, namely the moral working or reasoning. Hence the complexity we have spoken of. Hence the way in which the Bible is willing to talk about the heart rather than using the more specific term, the conscience.

The 'joint knowledge' is not necessarily something shared with God himself. Rather it is a knowledge we share with ourselves. Put simply, the conscience is man's power of self-reflection and of self-criticism. It is the moral reason. American Milton Rudnick helpfully defines it as, 'the self in the process of ethical deliberation and evaluation. . .'. He says, 'It is not someone or something else working in or upon man, but the moral self at work, involving all of a man's rational and emotional faculties.'⁷ In Sibbes' words, 'The soul reflecting upon itself'. We can agree, too, with Kenneth Kirk who, earlier this century, wrote, 'The exigencies of language force us often enough to speak of conscience as a distinct entity; but we must continually remind ourselves that it is no such thing. . . conscience is myself so far as I am a moral man.'⁸ Conscience is remarkable. It is one of the things that distinguishes us from the animals. In his mid-twentieth century classic on

the subject Norwegian Ole Hallesby writes, 'It is through the conscience that man acquires a consciousness of his humanity and is thus distinguished from the brute. . . This. . . is very remarkable. A sort of doubling of our personality takes place. The 'I' takes a position, so to speak, outside of itself. . . it then pronounces judgment upon itself. . . Then follows the most remarkable result of all. The judgment which the 'I' pronounces upon the 'I' is entirely objective and unbiased. . . at the judgment bar of conscience it is the accused person himself who passes judgment.'⁹ As remarkable as the conscience is we must not place it above other abilities, however. As R L Dabney points out in his PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY conscience is not a separate faculty. Why should we think of our ability to judge ourselves as somehow essentially different from our ability to judge others? It is only the fact that we ourselves are involved that makes us feel the process is so much more remarkable.¹⁰

Romans 2:14,15

The nearest the New Testament comes to anything like a definition of conscience is in Romans 2:14,15. A number of things emerge from these verses.

Firstly, everyone has a conscience, even pagans. The conscience belongs to man as man. These verses also help us to distinguish and identify the elements involved in making a moral decision. Although the word conscience is often used to refer to the whole process of making moral decisions there are in fact at least three clearly identifiable strands in the process.

1. The requirements of the Law of God which are written on every man's heart. *The Moral Record.*
2. The conscience itself which makes its judgments on the basis of the preceding element. *The Conscience Proper.*
3. A man's thoughts, his opinions. These come as he makes a decision on the basis of the mediation of his conscience. *The Mind or Opinion.*

When we use the word *conscience*, therefore, we should really restrict it to this second aspect of moral decision making, although it is easy to see why the word is also used for the whole process. The Dutchman, Willem A Brakel wrote of the three elements as knowledge (ie of God's will and law), witness (ie of conformity or lack of it) and acknowledgement (ie of deserving punishment or reward).¹¹ This corresponds to the Puritan idea, gleaned from Aquinas and the Schoolmen, of the conscience working *sylogistically*.

A syllogism is an inference from two *premises*, one *major* and one *minor*. The Puritans spoke of syllogisms of duty and syllogisms concerning our state before God. Jim Packer gives an example of the former in an essay on the *Puritan Conscience*,

'God forbids me to steal (major premise)
To take this money would be stealing (minor premise)
Therefore I must not take this money (conclusion)'

He also quotes two from Ames concerning our state before God,

'He that lives in sinne, shall dye:
I live in sinne,
therefore I shall dye.'

'Whosoever believes in Christ, shall not dye but live.
I believe in Christ;
therefore I shall not yie but live.'¹²

The major premise corresponds to the moral record (referred to as *sunteresis* or 'nature'), the minor one to the conscience proper (*suneidesis*). The conclusion is the work of the mind, defending or accusing.

Some would suppose that the conscience only acts in a negative, condemning way. One twentieth century theologian spoke of it as 'alien, dark, hostile and sinister'. This may have been the Greek view but Paul points out that there are times when even the Gentile conscience can provoke thoughts which excuse as well as accuse. A person can have either a 'bad conscience' or a 'good conscience'. (Strictly speaking, of course, it is not the conscience that is good or bad, any more than a barometer is bad if it correctly predicts stormy weather.) Certainly a Christian can have a good conscience. This is clear from 2 Corinthians 1:12 and 1 Timothy 1:19, for instance. Romans 2:14,15 plainly teaches the moral responsibility of all men. As Walter Chantry has observed, 'Conscience alone has witnessed sufficiently to the moral law, so that everyone is without excuse.'

Past, Present and Future

It would seem that the judgements of conscience can concern not only past and present but also the future (some would draw this conclusion from Romans 2:14,15 itself). In this latter role conscience acts more like a guide than a judge. Packer speaks of conscience as 'a mentor, prohibiting evil (Acts 24:16, Romans 13:5)' (future), 'a witness declaring facts (Romans 2:15, cf John 3:20)' (present) and 'a judge assessing desert (Romans 2:15; 9:1; 2 Corinthians 1:12)' (past).¹³ Hallesby also observes that conscience is generally at its weakest during sin (present)¹⁴ but at its strongest after the event (past).

Conclusion

The conscience is not the result of evolution. It is not simply the interiorisation of cultural norms or of social mores. The conscience undoubtedly bears witness to the culture and the morality around about it but this in no way explains its origin or how it functions.

Nor is conscience 'the voice of God' except as far as it is part of his general revelation to each individual of the existence of right and wrong and the need for judgement. It is rather what Opperwall labels, 'the internalised voice of those whose judgment of a person counts with him. It is the inner voice that testifies for the moral authorities that we recognise'.¹⁵ Keil says it is, 'not the echo of an immediate divine self-evidence at every moment, but the knowledge of a divine law which every man ... bears in his heart... an active consciousness of a divine-law established in man's heart. . .'.¹⁶ Thus it is a most important voice, one you dare not ignore.

Fallen conscience's judgements are inevitably inadequate, nevertheless they always bear some relation to the coming judgement. The voice is not as loud or as clear as before the Fall but it is still there anticipating, in Bishop Butler's words, 'a higher and more effectual sentence which shall hereafter second and affirm its own'.¹⁷ God has given every man a soul. The word *conscience* refers to that aspect of the soul concerned with morality. The conscience bears witness to the moral record in a person. On the basis of its witness decisions are made about right and wrong. We do not always like the witness that our conscience bears. Sometimes we do not even agree with it. We must all realise, however,

that the voice of conscience ought not to be ignored. John MacArthur¹⁸ suggests that the conscience may be the most under-appreciated and least understood attribute of humanity. He may well be right. Modern psychology, he goes on to suggest, is more concerned to silence it than to understand it. Let those who seek to make Christ the Lord of their conscience not do the same.

References

- 1 C A Pierce CONSCIENCE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, SCM, London 1955 p 5
- 2 The LXX translation of Ecclesiastes 10:20 using the Greek word for conscience is a case of mistranslation.
- 3 See Pierce's book
- 4 Phrases of Lord Byron, of John H Newman and of William Wordsworth respectively. cf the definition 'Privity of the soul with the omnipresent, omniscient God' (von Schubert).
- 5 C Maurer, THEOLOGICAL DICTIONARY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT, ed G Kittel (trans G Bromiley), p 900
- 6 Quoted by Packer, p 145
- 7 Milton Rudnick, CHRISTIAN ETHICS FOR TODAY, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1979, pp 125,126
- 8 Kenneth Kirk, CONSCIENCE AND ITS PROBLEMS, Longmans, London, p 57
- 9 O Hallesby, CONSCIENCE, (trans. C J Carlsen), IVF, London, 1950, p 11
- 10 R L Dabney, THE PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY, 1897, Sprinkle Reprint 1984, pp 282, 283
- 11 W A Brakel, THE CHRISTIAN'S REASONABLE SERVICE, SDG, p 317
- 12 J I Packer, AMONG GOD'S GIANTS, Kingsway, Eastbourne, 1991, p 143
- 13 Ibid, p 144
- 14 Contrast this with, 'Conscience is a coward, and those whose faults it has not strength to prevent it seldom has justice enough to accuse.' (Oliver Goldsmith, THE VICAR OF WAKEFIELD, 1766).
- 15 R Opperwall, article on *conscience* in THE INTERNATIONAL STANDARD BIBLE ENCYCLOPEDIA, ed G Bromiley, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1975, p 762
- 16 Keil, pp 162, 165
- 17 Bishop Butler, quoted by R E O White, p 232
- 18 John MacArthur Jr, THE VANISHING CONSCIENCE, 1994, p 61

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'Conscience. . . is as essential a part of man's moral nature as feeling is of his physical constitution. It is also like the other noble powers of his mind, indestructible. Neither life nor death, nor time nor eternity, nor the happiness of heaven, nor the misery of hell, will be able to extinguish this spark of moral life within the human breast.'

John King, CONSCIENCE, 1838