

# Conscience

What is it?

Why is it essential in a moral life?

Why must we be free to follow it?

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# Conscience

- The nature of conscience
- The job of conscience
- The necessity of conscience
- Challenges to conscience
- Conclusions

# What is *Conscience*?

- What is it *really*?
- What does conscience consist of?
- What are intellect and will?
- What is moral imagination?
- How does conscience operate?

# What is conscience, *really*?

- Question: Definitions of *conscience* are invariably elusive. Why?
- Because, though a noun, *conscience* is not a separate thing, in itself, but a way of talking about the function of free will and reason.
- What gives *conscience* substance in conversation is the feeling arising from a moral dilemma:
  - “My *conscience* is bothering me.”

# Elements of *Conscience*

- Intellect: the capacity to reason about moral values and problems in the present context
- Free Will: the capacity to choose between goods
- Knowledge: what we know about moral values and the present context
- Habit: what we are inclined to do as a matter of course
- Inner voice?: The Spirit of God, angels, demons

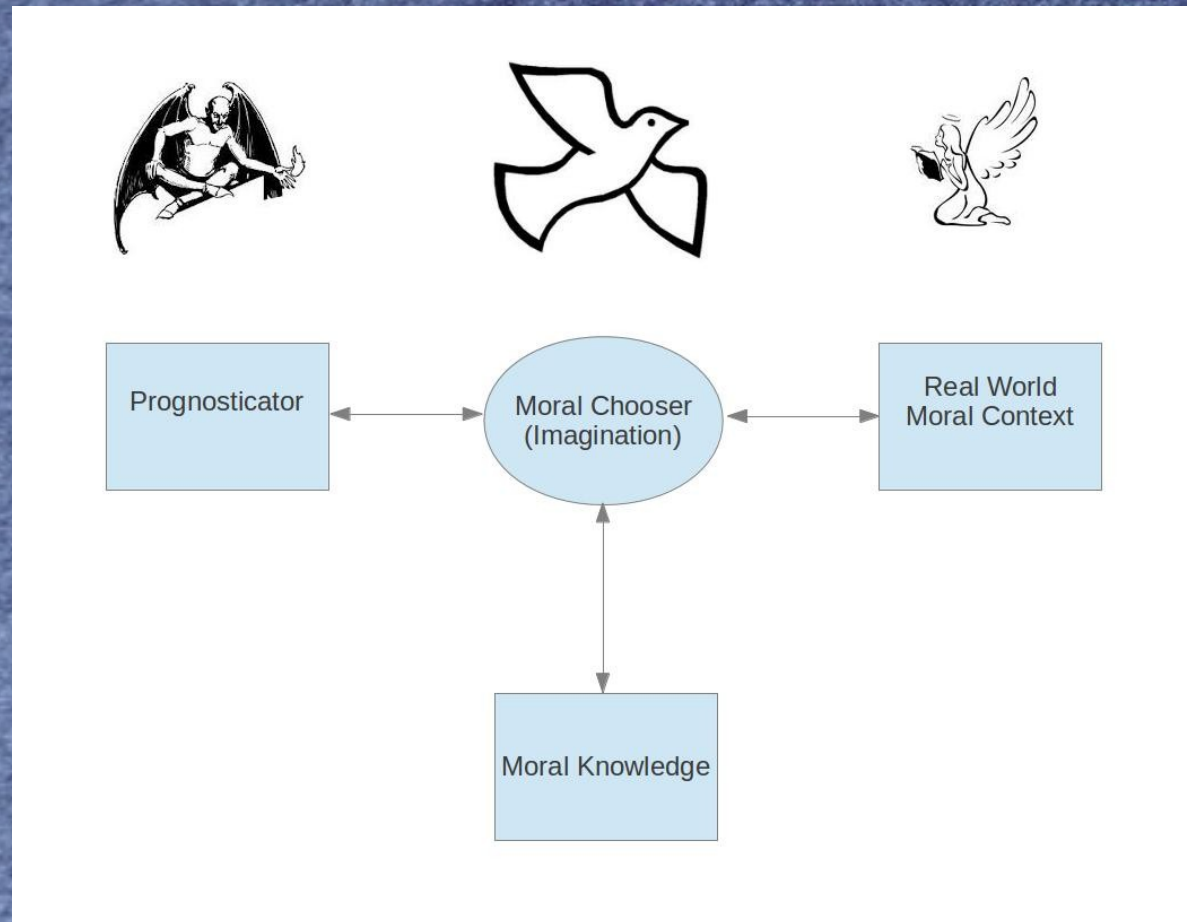
# Intellect and Will

- Free Will: impossible in a purely material reality
  - The soul hypothesis
  - Body (mind) and soul interface
  - *Compatibilism* is illogical.
- What is the seat of intellect?
  - Part material, the “gray matter”
  - Part spiritual: the soul can reason
  - Animals (without a soul) can “reason”
- Moral agency and responsibility

# Moral Imagination and Choice

- Consciousness is “vision centric.”
- Elements of moral imagination
  - “Seeing” the point of view of others – empathy
  - Grasping moral context: values, choices, challenges, capacities
  - Cause and effect: anticipation
- Complications:
  - Urges (conc. and unconc.): habit, natural inclinations
  - Games, projections, rationalization, sociopathology

# Inner Dialog





# The Job of *Conscience*

- The essential mandate of conscience.
- Informing and forming conscience.
- Conscience, values and experience.
- Presuppositions for a healthy conscience.
- Conscience and moral communities.

# The Mandate of *Conscience*

- It is morally obligatory to act in conformity to moral truth *as we know it and as we are able*.
- It is morally obligatory to seek to learn moral truth as we are able, *especially when we are in doubt*.
- It is morally obligatory to enter into dialog about moral truths when we are in conflict *and dialog is possible and we sense it may be fruitful*.
- It is morally obligatory to seek *the source of truth* if we sense that such a source exists.

# Informing and Forming Conscience

- Moral community (family habits, society, religion)
  - What I learned in kindergarten
  - Ubiquitous media messages
- Personal experience, reflection
  - Recognizing contextual similarities
  - Record of successes and failures
- Reasoning about values, causation, context, urges
  - Trusted sources of moral wisdom
  - Natural Law – our model of the human person, God

# *Conscience, Values and Experience*

- “Ethical axioms are found and tested not very differently from the axioms of science. Truth is what stands the test of experience.” Albert Einstein
- Just as we don't try to establish the laws of science by our own efforts in every generation, we do not attempt to establish the laws of morality by our own efforts.
- Nevertheless, when observation and reason discover a discrepancy, our assumptions undergo scrutiny. This may mean we “examine our conscience.”
- Yet, science and ethics are primarily social, not individual, enterprises. We don't keep “discrepancies” to ourselves.

# Keys to a Healthy *Conscience*

- Reason, experience, *faith*, values, desire, *trust*
  - Belief in free will.
  - Belief in personal responsibility.
  - Belief in personal reformability.
  - Belief in ultimate justice - trust.
  - Consistent moral experience.
- All the elements of *conscience* are reformable.
- Ideally, our faith and value system matures.

# *Conscience* and Trusted Communities

- Example trusted communities:
  - Families, neighborhoods, parishes, civic communities, gangs, clubs, platoons, ...
  - The Church. The Media. Government...
- “Stars” from all of the above have extra influence.
- The influences of the above are partly reason-based and partly emotional, where existing “moral imagination” and desire play a decisive role.

# The Necessity of Conscience

- Conscience is essential to personal existence.
- Society depends upon people with conscience.
- The view of pragmatism.
- The maturing conscience and flourishing society.

# Why is *conscience* essential?

## The Person

- Conscience is essential to moral behavior. What does that mean?
  - Knowledge and understanding of moral value, principle, context and causality guide our action.
  - We may act reflexively (by rote) in routine cases.
  - The inner dialog must recognize and acknowledge ignorance and lack of understanding, when present.
  - This triggers investigation, including consultation.
  - The inner dialog must also become increasingly sensitive to *the source of truth*.



# Why is *conscience* essential?

## The Polity

- Even in a dictatorship, we operate as autonomous moral agents.
- Government limits, but cannot wholly replace, moral choices.
  - It mitigates, but does not remove, responsibility.
  - A nanny state fosters, even coerces, but cannot force irresponsibility. It may even deny free will!
  - Society operates more efficiently and more robustly when individuals grow in personal responsibility.

# Pragmatism and Free Will

- “One cannot base one's conduct on the idea that everything is determined, because one does not know what has been determined. Instead, one has to adopt the effective theory that one has free will and that one is responsible for one's actions. This theory is not very good at predicting human behavior, but we adopt it because there is no chance of solving the equations arising from the fundamental laws. There is also a Darwinian reason that we believe in free will: A society in which the individual feels responsible for his or her actions is more likely to work together and survive to spread its values.” Stephen Hawking

# Tasks of a maturing *Conscience*

- Leadership and government
- Vocations
- Covenant relationships
- Self improvement
- Faith, Hope and Sacrificial Love
- Devotion to Truth
- Orientation to God

# Challenges to *Conscience*

- Individual challenges to conscience.
- Opposition to conscience in society.
  - Abuse of language.
  - The hermeneutic of suspicion.
- Opposition to conscience in government.
  - Sub vs. super sidiarity.

# Individual Challenges to *Conscience*

- Rationalization
- Judgmentalism, projection and paranoia
- Envy, jealousy, lust, fear
- Intoxication, illness
- Habits of sin

# How does society oppose conscience?

## *Culture*

- Inner dialog influenced by “other” voices
- Relentless barrage of temptations
  - Inner urges and habits
  - Ubiquitous “messages” – not just Madison Avenue!
- Icons of mass media, social milieu – hype!
- Mass reaction, even hysteria, substitutes for individual responsibility formed by conscience

# Abuse of Language

- Conscience chooses between goods
  - Abuse of language distorts the perception of goods
- Orwellian doublespeak and political correctness
  - Confuses inner dialog.
  - Encourages, aids and abets abandonment of personal responsibility, substituting group-think.
  - Values become the values of the mob.
  - Discourages probing *public* dialog.

# The Hermeneutic of Suspicion

- Tradition is the soil of values and principles
  - The hermeneutic of suspicion uproots values and principles, which then wither and die
- The ostensible purpose is to remove a “cancer.”
  - Misdiagnoses and “surgical ineptitude” can be fatal.
  - The cultural predisposition of the hermeneutic of suspicion is to take a meat cleaver into the operating room.



# How does society oppose conscience?

## *Government*

- Government, laws and morality – order vs. chaos
  - Laws, laws, laws – and ignorance is no excuse!
  - Government fiat, corruption
  - Conscience can be paralyzed with resentment
- *Public vs. private morality and faith!!!*
  - “Separation of Church and State”
  - Public morality and faith = political correctness!
  - Private morality and faith increasingly marginalized!
  - Public morality becomes the established religion!

# “Sub” vs. “Super” sidiarity

- Subsidiarity: higher levels of authority assist lower levels in accomplishing the tasks of *conscience*, including *formation* and *reform*, both of which are inherently individual responsibilities.
- Supersidiarity: higher levels of authority require lower levels to *conform*. In this view, individual *conscience* is irrelevant and increasingly atrophies.
- A society built on the principle of supersidiarity is doomed to common mode failure and ultimate chaos.

# Conclusions

- Conscience, in reality the operation of free will under the influence of reason, knowledge and advice, is essential to individual responsibility.
- Individual responsibility, the core of individual initiative, is essential to a flourishing society.
- Individuals, society, government and culture may, and often do, deny individual responsibility. The inevitable result is moral decay and social collapse.