

The Conscience

Conscience – the source of a moral judgement.

- The conscience is expected to play a decisive role in any moral decisions.

St Augustine of Hippo

- There is a God – he is the source of all goodness.
- The conscience comes from God's divine love.
- The conscience is God's love, which is poured to human beings.
- It is the moment when God speaks to the individual and reveals himself in solitary moments.
- When God's love and moral virtue is revealed, human beings acknowledge their own inadequacy – imagine doing a sport and thinking you are good at it, then a professional comes along and you realise that you are not as good as you thought – same as an experience of God.
- God is perfect love and virtue – any divine experience will reveal the inadequacies of being human and our inability to do anything about it.
- Augustine said that we should make the conscience the most important element of our moral decision-making – more important than moral teachings of the church.
- He believed that the conscience is the voice of God within – some argue that it is not possible to verify whether it is God's voice or self-delusion.
- Could be argued that God contradicts himself if he tells one person to do the opposite of someone else.

Aquinas

- Conscience is centred on Natural Law – it is part of an intellectual rational approach – what ought to be done in a particular situation.
- It is linked to the moral virtues and the Golden Mean.
- He describes the conscience as the 'application of knowledge to activity' - it is considered a method by which humans work out what is morally right.
- Synderesis – recto ratio (right reason) – intellectual process of gaining knowledge and going through evidence logically – it is not a command.
- Conscientia – applying right reason to a specific issue.
- The conscience comprises these two elements and is the application of right reason to life issues.

Criticisms

- Does not take into account that different societies have different moral laws – conscience may vary.
- The conscience of each human points to the telos of goodness and is not variable from person to person – different conclusions on ethical issues.
- Grounded in Natural Law – can be seen as an expired view because modern understandings may not consider Natural Law.
- Some argue that it is impossible to step from a moral principle to an action.

Joseph Butler

- Conscience – faculty of reflection.
- Influenced by Aristotle and Aquinas.
- The conscience separates human beings from other sentient beings.
- Conscience is human awareness – other creatures do not have this awareness.
- Other creatures exist but do not try to understand their being – human beings do.
- The conscience develops through human reflection.
- It is considered to be the voice of God within – it is not selfless, but selfish.
- Christian Golden Rule – you have to love yourself to have self-respect, and then this respect will be transferred to others.
- Butler argued that criminals have no conscience – no intuitive sense of their own worth – they do not love themselves or have any self respect, this is why they commit crimes.
- You have to implant self-respect in yourself to become truly one of God's people.
- He makes a link between God, nature and morality – God created the natural order; therefore a moral sense is imbedded into all human beings.
- The innate moral sense is the conscience – criminals have allowed their conscience to be degraded by degrading themselves – low self esteem.
- Butler believed that there is a 'great wickedness' within the human race – there is a struggle that goes on in every human being = the struggle between the conscience and passion.
- The passions can never be fulfilled – the desire to fulfil them is what leads to criminal behaviour and evil acts.
- To solve this problem we must have disciplined and moral lives.
- Passions are innate to humanity – so is the desire for virtue and the moral life.
- 'We are capable of moral improvement'.

Criticisms

- The conscience does not exist to make human beings think that they are good – it is there to convict them when they do wrong.
- Could be argued that criminals do not do wrong because they lack self-respect – they do wrong through too much self-regard.
- Mass genocide show human nature to be brutal – optimistic view of human nature undermines the dangers of humans.

John Henry Newman

- Conscience is independent of any system of authority.
- The conscience is a moral aspect of a human being's relationship with God.
- Human beings possess an innate sense of what is right or wrong.
- 'Impulses of nature' – describes how human beings first develop a moral sense as children – this continues to develop throughout life.
- Newman believed that there is a link between what is morally wrong and what is against God.
- Children have an innate awareness of God and morality – nature gives humans an awareness of God and goodness, however, nurture is capable of destroying this.
- The conscience is important in determining the beliefs of the church – influences a relationship between a Christian and the church.
- The church should not act as dominant structure – Christians should be guided by the conscience.
- The conscience is agent centred – humans should examine their conscience so that they become better judges of what ideas and values are morally good.
- The conscience, aided by faith, leads us to knowledge of God.

Criticisms

- Personal engagement is not objective – this makes the conscience self-centred. Newman did not think about his duty to his friends and supporters when he converted to Roman Catholicism – his conscience led him to abandon his closest friends and family.

Freud

- Saw the conscience in terms of a guilt complex – the conscience is a thought process, which leads humans to take actions out of a sense of guilt and embarrassment from previous actions or feelings.
- Oedipus complex – desire for male child to have sex with his mother and kill his father – Electra complex for girls – deep feelings of guilt for both.
- Conscience develops as a result of this sense of guilt – the child knows it is wrong to want to remove one parent and to sexually desire the other.
 - This desire develops from the child's physical needs for love and affection.
 - The stage ends when the child represses their sexual instincts and identifies with the parent of the same sex – resolution of the Oedipus complex is the origin for moral development of the person.
- The child's physical need for love and affection causes the development of the human psyche and create the character of the human psyche.
- Reverses Aristotelian idea of matter and the soul – in Freud's view, the physical needs of the child creates their psychological framework.
- Id – inner conscious self.
 - Primitive instincts – basic drives of human characteristics such as sex and aggression.
 - Functions on pain and pleasure principles – no moral basis.
 - The id is unconscious and repressed in adults.
- Ego – conscious.
 - Seen by other people.
 - The ego is the self – interacts with the physical and the social world.
 - Evaluates and plans – restricts the desires of the id and is advised by the superego.
- Superego – ethical component of the human psyche.
 - Balance between the id and the ego.
 - Moral conscience that controls the ego's desires.
 - Criticisms and aspirations direct the ego towards a moral outcome.
- Freud argues that breaking the rules is linked in the conscience to the superego.
- Religious people believe that breaking God's law is a rebellion against the heavenly father.
- Non-believers argue that the conscience is a product of traditional male dominated societies.
- Politicians, rulers and judges were mostly male, fathers were considered to be heads of families, therefore they made the rules – to break a rule would be seen as an act of rebellion against the father = leads to guilt and punishment.
 - Freud saw that the conscience symbolised the sense of guilt that came from disobeying the laws created by 'fathers' – societies laws.
- An advantage of Freud's theory – gives a significant role to the conscience as an ethical decision making source.

- He believed that the conscience or the super ego directs us to perform to a higher moral standard – guilt plays a part in our decision-making.
- Freud stressed the importance of the parent's role in developing morality.

Criticisms

- Relativist – humans have different minds and they are each unique, this means that the conscience will vary from person to person.
 - It becomes meaningless to obey your own conscience because it is just your own mind telling you what to do – not an objective source of moral truth.
 - It becomes your own inner voice, not the inner voice of God.

Fromm

- Marxist.
- Believed that human beings imagine that they have free will – imagine that their views are personal – Fromm considered this view to be an illusion.
 - From birth humans are reduced to a state of obedience to forces that the individual cannot see.
- Human beings do not control their own lives – process of control from others begins at birth = parents controlling their children.
 - Individual is moulded by the needs of society – expressed through the family.
 - The individual is given a social character – made to fit the society.
 - Removal of individuality creates a social consciousness that makes people aware of who they are and which group they belong in.
- Middle ages – Church created this social character.
 - Nazi Germany – Jews were considered and treated as less than human, they were not part of the social consciousness of the German people = authoritarian conscience.
- Fromm suggested that public opinion creates a liberal society's moral conscience – advertisements, scientists and politicians convince people that there is no alternative.
 - TINA principle (There Is No Alternative) – people are persuaded to believe that they control their lives, even though they do not.
- People's actions are predetermined by the needs of the market place – morally, the discipline of work becomes important, not because it is good for the people, but because it maximises profits of companies.
- People feel guilty when they are unemployed – they buy more to feed the capitalist economy, but still feel guilty of overexploiting the earth.
- People do not have any influence on the society that they are born in – they are creatures of their historic and economic situation.
- Fromm believed that people's attitudes are conditioned by their economic and social background – conscience is determined by socio-economic forces.
- Fromm believed in the Freudian sense of guilt – people's attitudes are predetermined by when they are born and the class they grow up in.
 - Anxieties are economic and social – they have guilt about the benefits that come from their place in history.
 - A middle class person will want the wealth to buy a house, but will feel guilty about these desires – desire for wealth and consequential guilt are inbuilt into the individual.
 - This leads to a situation where a person lives a happy economically prosperous life, but has no inner contentment = self-alienation.
- Fromm began to develop the idea of hope and human liberation from self-alienation – 'Man is the only creature endowed with conscience. His conscience is the voice that calls him back to himself'.
- The conscience allows humans to rise above the alienation of modern society – conscience is based on biophilia (love of and for life).

Criticisms

- How can humans rise above the alienation if everyone is predetermined to be alienated? – Fromm said that to be free we must be conscientious, which means being a person of conscience.
- Fromm analysed the situation but did not provide a cure – Michel Foucault: the conscience acts to condemn the individual, not liberate them – there is a link between the conscience and the guilt complex.
- How is a conscience based on the love of and for life to be used? – Fromm says that a love of life should be applied to all moral decisions – businesses treating their employees as partners, not destroying the ecosystem
 - Fromm's theory is designed to enhance the quality of life and empower individuals.

Piaget and Kohlberg

- Piaget – all human beings do not have the same conscience.
- Train journey
 - You start life at Station A and end your life at Station C.
 - There are 2 types of people: some will get off at Station B- they do not complete their moral journey; their development has been stunted and they will be incapable of developing beyond the early stages of their life through life.
 - Others get off at Station C – their moral sense has been allowed to develop.
- First type of conscience – heteronomous morality
 - Develops in the early years, until the age of 9 or 10.
 - The moral sense is other based – the child does not decide their own moral views, this is decided for them by their parents or whoever controls their moral upbringing.
 - Moral conscience is based on the observance of rules – punishment when rules are not followed.
 - Some people never develop beyond this stage – their life is dominated by the need to obey precise rules of behaviour.
- Second type of conscience – autonomous morality.
 - Starts around the age of 10.
 - People that get off at Station C.
 - They are mature enough to decide what is morally good for them and what is not.
 - Morality is a matter of self-discipline not external discipline.
- Piaget also believed that relationships lead to the development of a moral conscience – at early stages these relationships are based on social control and obedience to rules, at a later stage they are more open.
- There is an increasing awareness of the need for mutual respect and social harmony.
- Kohlberg – stated that there are a greater number of stages in life where a person can stop their moral journey.
- More pessimistic than Piaget – most people do not develop beyond the early stages of moral development.

Criticisms

- The simplicity of Piaget's theory and his dependence on empirical and questionable studies of children.
- Critics question Piaget and Kohlberg's theory of a moral route which all human beings pass, and question their discovery of a moral conscience.

Is the conscience reliable?

- Fundamental problem with the conscience is that it varies in meaning to different philosophers.
- Humans want to believe that they have a sense of right and wrong – the idea of a conscience provides this.
- There is no way of knowing who's conscience is right or wrong – the conscience might tell one person to do one thing and another person to do the opposite – this questions the moral authority of the conscience as a reliable guide to decision making.
- Some argue that guilt is a corrosive force – destroys freedom and human creativity.
- The conscience may be nothing more than the internalised voice of upbringing and socialisation – cannot be relied on because it is society's opinion – if there is an objective idea of what is right and wrong, then the conscience cannot help the moral agent to find it.

Criticisms

- **Friedrich Nietzsche** – nihilistic view – concepts such as right and wrong do not exist. Life is about the ability to control your own life – the power of will. There is no need for a conscience – it only exists to prevent personal freedom and acts as a barrier to self-realisation.
- **Bentham** – the conscience is an inhibition – hermits whose conscience leads them to reject wealth and live as a pauper are condemned because they have a misguided idea of pleasure – the conscience is a product of a false understanding of what pleasure is.
- **Karl Marx** – life is about the group, not the individual. Conscience of individualism emerged to preserve the wealth and power of capitalist classes.
 - The conscience is a way of exerting social control.
 - When the church controlled the thought process of peasants, the church determined the conscience.
- **Richard Dawkins** – the evolutionary process creates morals, therefore the conscience is a biological process.
- **Richard Rorty** – relativist – no such thing as universal moral values, the conscience is a person's sense of guilt when he or she goes against their own or their group's moral inclinations.