

[The following information is gleaned and summarized by Fr. Leo from:]

Christian Ethics: Moral Theology in the Light of Vatican II,

Volume II, General Moral Theology

by Rev. Karl H. Peschke

Chapter III: CONSCIENCE pp. 203-246

The moral precepts as objective norms of morality can be compared to signposts and markers on the road which indicate the direction the traveler must take in order to reach his goal. The mere existence of the signposts however is not enough to help people on their way. They need a sense to perceive the signs, to select from among them the relevant ones, and also to help them where there are none. This sense is a person's conscience. It is that moral faculty which tells people subjectively what is good and evil and which manifests their moral obligation to them.

A. Notion and origin of conscience

I. Concept of conscience (a distinction:)

1. Conscience as moral faculty (like reason or free will or feelings)

Some argue that conscience is the process in which the general norms of the moral law are applied to a concrete action which a person is about to perform or has performed, telling the person what his obligation is here and now or judging his past action. In this view, conscience is considered a judgment of the practical reason.

[However], Conscience is more than mere reason, more than will, more than mere feeling, it is the depth of human existence, the innermost core of the person in his directedness towards God and in his ultimate sustenance by Him.

[Thus] conscience is a faculty in its own right, distinct from reason, will and feeling. It is that faculty, situated in the very depth and venter of the human person, which accords to man an understanding of his meaning and destiny, an awareness of the divine purpose behind the world, a perception of his personal calling within God's plan, and an experience of the imperative character of this calling. Implied in this is the spiritual and emotional urge to comply with the demands resulting from the call (ie, the religious dimension). It is the place where a person is called to responsibility before God. This is the reason why disobedience to its voice entails the guilt of sin.

[MDI] Conscience can then be defined as that faculty which makes known to man his moral obligation and urges him to fulfill those obligations. It shows man what his ultimate calling and the divine Spirit require of him individually as his personal obligation and leads him to perceive the binding force of those requirements. Not only the requirements on man's nature but also of grace and the divine Spirit are manifested by conscience.

2. Conscience as practical moral judgment (the dictates of conscience)

The dictates of conscience contain a double element. The first element is the judgment on the morality of a concrete action which a person intends to perform/omit or has performed/omitted. (These judgments may be right or wrong based on objective morality.) The second element is the command and obligation that what has been recognized as good must be done or should have been done, and what has been recognized as evil must be omitted or should have been omitted. (The recognition must be followed regardless of objective morality.)

3. Division of conscience

- Antecedent conscience (before the act/omission) = commands, exhorts, permits, forbids.
- Consequent conscience (after the act/omission) = evaluates, then approves, excuses, reproves, accuses.
- Right conscience = the moral judgment agrees with objective norms of morality.
- Erroneous conscience = the moral judgment disagrees with objective norms of morality.
- Invincibly erroneous conscience = not guilty since the person has no awareness of the possibility of error.
- Vincibly erroneous conscience = guilty, because with some good will the error could be corrected; for example: the perplexed, lax, and scrupulous consciences.
- Certain conscience = passes judgment without fear of error; may still be erroneous if out of sync with objective norms of morality.
- Doubtful conscience = passes/suspends judgment with fear of error. (*More on these distinctions latter...*)

II. Holy Scripture on the nature of conscience

Old Testament: The word “conscience” is not found in the OT except for Wisdom 17:11. However, the concept is known. The OT makes use of the terms “mind” and “heart” to express the reality of conscience.

New Testament: The word “conscience” is not found in the Gospels. But again the concept is known. The Gospels use the term/phrase “the light in you.” St. Paul’s use of the word refers to an awareness of moral principles, or witnessing to the knowledge of moral truths written upon the heart by God.

III. Origin and development of conscience

It is enough to say that no culture has ever been found in which conscience is not recognized as a fact.

1. Argument about the origin of conscience

Briefly, some thinkers like Freud, Jung, and Nietzsche argued that one’s environment influenced his/her conscience. They placed greater stress on individual opinions. For these thinkers, right and wrong is a matter of personal subjectivity – meaning everyone gets to decide for him or herself what is right and wrong.

2. Development and formation of conscience

A distinction must be made between the evolving conscience in childhood, which is predominately an authoritarian conscience of a “must-conscience”, and the mature, adult form of conscience, which can be qualified as an “ought-conscience”. It is of greatest importance that on the way to adulthood the authoritarian must conscience of the child develops into the personal ought-conscience of the grown-up, mature person.

A child’s must-conscience evolves out of parental commands, restrictions, and prohibitions. The child spontaneously submits to the parent’s competence and knowledge, and the child must also fear punishment for disobedience. As the child grows toward adulthood, the must-conscience is to give way to the mature ought-conscience. Fear of punishment should no longer be the determining factor. Rather, judgments are maturely made out of one’s convictions and values based on the inner law of man’s nature and the divine calling as spelled out in that center of the human person which is one’s true self. Although there remain many ‘musts’ in adulthood, they spring from a sense of duty to build one’s personality and from a sense of personal responsibility for the common good and for the kingdom of the Lord.

Ideal spiritual adulthood of the conscience would consist in this: that the compass of love would point the direction (like signposts) so unflinching that constraint by the external law would no longer be needed.

B. The binding force of conscience

I. The certain conscience

1. Certain conscience must always be obeyed when it commands or forbids. It may always be followed when it permits something. Why? Because conscience is that appropriate faculty of man which tells him what his moral duties are. To disobey this faculty is to disobey the moral order or the will of God, and is therefore sinful.
2. The certainty required for the judgments of conscience generally need not be a strict moral certainty, but wide moral certainty is sufficient. Wide moral certainty is accompanied by a slight yet negligible fear of error, because the possibility of error is of little probability.
3. The invincibly erroneous conscience must be followed just the same as a certain conscience which is right. To disobey this certain, though erroneous judgment of conscience would mean to disobey what is subjectively believed as one’s moral duty and God’s will; therefore, it would be sinful.

II. The vincibly erroneous and lax conscience

The vincibly erroneous conscience cannot be followed as a legitimate rule of action. Conscience is vincibly erroneous if it dawns on man that his moral outlook might not be entirely sound or if he is aware of being careless and irresponsible in his decisions. Before someone in this state may act, he must first seek the truth. If he cannot find the truth, he must postpone the act or follow a safer line of action.

The lax conscience is inclined, on insufficient grounds, to judge a thing to be lawful which is indeed sinful, or something to be venial sin which is actually a grave sin (eg: skipping masses of obligation). In a light-minded and sometimes frivolous way the lax conscience does not face up to the gravity of the moral obligation. Individuals in this state (aka. Pharisaic conscience) will attach great importance to small things and make light of serious matters. A lax conscience is usually the

result of grave lukewarmness in the service of God. The antithesis of a lax conscience is a tender or delicate conscience, which is noted for clear and vigilant discernment of the good.

III. The perplexed conscience

The perplexed conscience is a type of erroneous conscience which, confronted with two alternative precepts, fears sin in whatever choice it makes. The perplexed conscience is erroneous because, objectively speaking, only one of the two alternatives can be binding. It would contradict justice and the wisdom of God if man were confronted with equally binding obligations. A person in this state, if time permits, must seek the truth before acting; if not time, then he must choose what appears to him as the lesser of two evils of either of the alternatives.

IV. The scrupulous conscience

Scrupulosity is the persistent, gnawing, unreasonable fear that one has offended God or is about to do so. The scrupulous person is in constant dread of sin where there is none, or of mortal sin where there is only venial sin.

a) Different types of scrupulosity

1. Scrupulosity due to temporary crises, which may be characterized as times of conversion or spiritual deepening.
2. Compensatory scrupulosity is a disquieted unrest of conscience which conceals a fundamental lack of generosity in the spiritual life (eg: "I didn't really offend God, did I?").
3. Obsessive-compulsive scrupulosity is the severest form and a psychic disease/illness. Persons in this state suffer a perpetual guilt complex and are too stubborn to forgive themselves.

b) Counselling the scrupulous

My best advice: don't try this on your own! These people need professional help. If you want to help them, try to convince them to seek help from a psychiatrist or a veteran priest.

V. The doubtful conscience

Conscience is doubtful if it is in a state of uncertainty as to the lawfulness or obligation of an action; the individual thinks that either side may be true.

Norms for action with a doubtful conscience: In a practical doubt about the lawfulness of an action one may never act (aka. "When in doubt, DON'T!"). Why? Because by acting with a doubtful conscience, a person would expose himself to the danger of injustice/sin, and that in itself would be an injustice/sin.

C. Formation of a certain conscience by means of reflexive principles and preference rules

I. Nature and varieties of reflexive principles

Reflex principles are rules of prudence which do not solve a doubt concerning the existence of a law, moral principle or fact by intrinsic or extrinsic evidence, but only indicate as to where, in cases of unsolvable doubt, the greater right is usually to be found and the lesser evil to be feared, and which side therefore is to be favored as long as the doubt persists.

The most comprehensive of the reflex principles, to which all the others can be reduced is: In doubt, we must stand on that side where presumption stands. Presumption is understood as a conjecture as to where in cases of doubt the greater right commonly lies and the lesser injustice is to be feared.

The other reflex principles specify more in detail where in doubt presumption stands. They are the following:

1. In doubt, the condition of the possessor is the better.
2. In doubt, favor the accuse; or crime is not resumed, but proved.
3. In doubt, presumption stands on the side of the superior.
4. In doubt, stand for validity of the act (eg, the marriage bond).
5. In doubt, amplify the favorable, restrict the unfavorable.
6. In doubt, presumption stands for the usual and the ordinary.
7. In doubt, favor the customary and hitherto approved.
8. A doubtful law does not oblige, ie, presumption stands for liberty.

To instances of doubtful facts the following rules apply:

1. If there is risk of serious spiritual or temporal harm (be it to self, to another person or to a community), which one is obliged to avoid by an indubitable law, the safer alternative must be chosen. Eg, one may not enjoy even an once the use of narcotics because of the great and immediate peril of addiction with all of its ruinous effects.
2. If there is only a question of the honesty of an action, where no risk of serious spiritual or temporal harm is involved, it is probable that one is not bound to opt for the safer alternative.

II. The controversy on the use of probability [this section omitted]

III. Preference rules

Preference rules serve as intrinsic criteria for the solution of moral problems. A most fundamental rule and a presupposition for many other rules is the principle that values of more basic importance have to be preferred to values of lesser importance. The hierarchy and precedence of values is ultimately determined by man's ultimate end. Those values are of greater importance for the realization of this end merit precedence. This hierarchy of values will very depending on the individual's belief/understanding of his/her ultimate end.

D. Freedom and commitment of conscience

1. The right to freedom of conscience

In short a man is not to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience. Nor, on the other hand is he to be restrained from acting in accordance with his conscience. In his moral decisions, man ought to be fully free, not driven by coercion but motivated by a sense of duty. However, freedom of conscience is not without its problems/difficulties. (Remember all those various types of erroneous consciences...)

2. The duty to form one's conscience

Although conscience is the ultimate subjective norm of moral conduct, it is a norm which must conform to the higher norms of objective world of truth. Since conscience stands in need of illumination and guidance, a man is responsible for its formation. Not to inform one's conscience is a neglect/rejection of God's calling.

The sources of information are the order of creation, the word of God, man's personal communion with Christ, the living faith of the community, and findings of ethical sciences. For the believer, the moral teaching of the Church (as the official interpreter of Christ's Revelation) forms a primary source of the Christian's conscience judgments.

Only self-conceited and haughty pride will in superficial preference rely on its own insights without openness and docility to the teaching of those who have the special competence and who are the God-willed authorities on questions of faith and morals (= infallibility). The formation of conscience must go hand in hand with the realism of humility, which is aware of the necessary limitations of every individual.