

## CONSCIENCE

Conscience is the psychological faculty by which we are aware of and respond to the moral character of our own actions. It is most commonly thought of as the source of pains we suffer as a result of doing what we believe is wrong --- the pains of guilt, or “pangs of conscience.” It may also be seen, more controversially, as the source of our knowledge of what is right and wrong, or as a motive for moral conduct. Thus a person who is motivated to act on principle is said to act “conscientiously.”

These terms come from the Latin “conscientia,” a direct translation of the Greek “syneidesis.” This ranges in meaning from being aware of something (hence our “consciousness”) to “knowing something in common with” someone. Knowing something in common with someone can mean sharing his secret, and this puts you in a position to serve as a witness against him. Thus the term came to have a judicial use, to describe one who could bear witness. In certain contexts, “syneidesis” came to mean a state of knowing in common with oneself, and so of bearing witness against oneself.

Although these terms appear in Stoic and Epicurean works, conscience did not receive extensive philosophical treatment until the Medieval period, when treatises on conscience became standard. Medieval philosophers distinguished two aspects of conscience, “conscientia” and “synderesis.” Roughly, “synderesis” (a technical term of uncertain origin) refers to the ineradicable and infallible basis of conscience in human nature, while “conscientia” refers to the more particular judgments we make about our actions. There are various ways of specifying the two ideas further. In Thomas Aquinas’s (1225--1274) account, which became standard, synderesis grasps the basic moral principles which are the first premises of practical reasoning, while conscientia is the conclusion, the act of judging that one ought to perform a particular action. Synderesis is infallible, but conscientia can be mistaken, due to mistaken factual premises or faulty reasoning. Medieval philosophers raised a variety of questions about these two aspects of conscience: whether they are inborn powers, learned dispositions, or actions; whether they are intellectual, motivational, or affective; and whether conscience is a manifestation of practical reason or a separate faculty. Above all, medieval thinkers were interested in the question whether conscience is

fallible, and, if it is fallible, to what extent one is responsible for (or sins in) acting in accordance with an erring conscience.

Modern moral philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did little with the concept of conscience except identify it with whatever they took to be the basic moral faculty, or with that faculty when it operates in judgment upon one's own actions. Thus for rationalist philosophers, conscience is the voice of reason judging one's motives and actions; while for sentimentalists and later utilitarians, conscience consists in the second-order sentiments of approval and disapproval we feel towards our own motives and sentiments. An important exception is the eclectic philosopher Joseph Butler (1692--1752), who brought together insights from sentimentalism and rationalism and emphasized the connection of these philosophical ideas with more popular and religious conceptions of morality. Butler identified conscience with a natural disposition to approve or disapprove of our motives and actions in accordance with reason and to act accordingly. But conscience is not only a part of our nature: it claims a special authority over other principles equally natural to us, which it retains even when it lacks the power to execute its commands. To explain the distinction between power and authority, Butler argued, we must understand human nature as a constitution, in the political as well as the biological sense, in which there is a hierarchy of principles, some having the right to control others. Just as we act contrary to our natural constitution when we gratify a strong but destructive passion at the expense of our long term interests, so we act contrary to our nature when we pursue passion or self-interest in violation of conscience.

The advent of evolutionary thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought with it a new set of questions about conscience. If human beings evolved from the "lower" animals, then those attributes which seem to distinguish human beings from other animals must also have evolved from more primitive characteristics. An account of how conscience, along with other distinctive human attributes such as reason, language, and aesthetic sensibilities, could have evolved seems to be required. In The Descent of Man (1871), Charles Darwin (1809--1882) argued that the development of conscience in social animals was inevitable once they developed the powers of reflection and memory. The altruistic and cooperative instincts which characterize social animals are frequently less strong than appetitive instincts such as fear, hunger, or lust; but they make more persistent and enduring claims on the animal's

mind. Appetites, by contrast, no longer seem important once they have been satisfied. An animal which gratifies its appetites at the expense of its young or its comrades, once able to reflect back on what it has done, will experience remorse. When reason and language enable the animal to remember these experiences, the social instincts acquire the special authority of conscience: we come to believe that we ought to obey them.

Other thinkers, especially Friedrich Nietzsche (1844--1900) and Sigmund Freud (1856--1939), saw the acquisition of conscience as a more decisive break with our animal past. Both believed that conscience resulted from a process of "internalization." When our natural aggressive instincts are suppressed for the sake of social life, we find an outlet for them by turning them against ourselves, inflicting pain on ourselves in the form of guilt. The resulting psychological formation, the existence in the psyche of a superego or conscience which can punish us for giving way to our natural impulses, makes self-mastery possible. Because it is society and, in particular, our parents that train us to suppress aggression, self-mastery is exercised for the sake of social requirements or obedience to parental command: the conscience is a kind of internally authoritative voice of one's society and parents. These accounts of the origin of conscience are sometimes viewed as attacks on morality. But it is possible to understand them simply as explanations of how human beings acquired the self-mastery, or control of one part of the soul by another, that philosophers from Plato to Kant have identified with our moral nature. Nietzsche and Freud did raise important questions, however, about the price humanity has paid for our distinctive self-mastery. Both saw internalization as having a natural dynamic that causes guilt to escalate, so that the better we become, the more guilt we feel, and the more inclined we become to reject our aggressive and sexual natures altogether, with potentially disastrous results. If they are right, the vindication of our moral nature depends on whether the self-mastery which we get from conscience can be detached from social and parental authority, and exercised instead in the name of a set of sane and realistic standards derived from reason.

See also: Civil Disobedience; Darwin; Freud; Human Nature; Moral Development; Nietzsche; Psychoanalysis; Thomas Aquinas

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