PART FOUR

Conscience and the Moral Self

Ferrater and conscience as a rational against sociological theories which are described as "emotional". Aquinas as the psychologist of the soul. Lucia as an example in moral behavior and P. Deleuze as "the moral worlds". Some recent view of the "emotional" element or in a more modern view of the social structure. Many people agree with the idea of an "emotional" philosopher Joseph Butler who said that "we have a capacity of affectedness upon actions and sentiments, and making them as objects of our thoughts and actions that we normally and not our intellects approve these actions, under the pretense of their being vicious and wrongful, and disapproving them as directed and impudent." Some take this statement to mean that we are within an emotional mode and to achieve instant ethics, but others deny it with a seemingly "unfruitful" evaluative capacity.

Hobbes demanded its definition of conscience, which is a reasonable weight and authority. "Freedom of conscience" is the key for Habermas in our culture. Doing something "for the sake of conscience" has not please in our language. Modernism and rationalism are the two main ideas in our culture. "Conscience" is a resistance and fearless voice in our moral society. A systematic strong-minded stance to clarify the meaning of conscience.

Ethically, "conscience" means to us from the Latin root conscientia a word that is translated to new distinct form in English "conscious" or "conscience". This dual meaning of existence evolved symbolically as we came to realize "conscience" as the moral sphere, reducing the term "conscience" to the emotional field of consciousness. In Geneva and in Aristotle's psychology, Eric D'Arcy points...
Conscience

"Conscience" is a term that suffers from overfamiliarity, and yet it is difficult to define. The Oxford English Dictionary tells us that "opinions as to the nature, function, and authority of conscience are widely divergent, varying from the conception of the mere exercise of the ordinary judgment on moral questions, to that of an infallible guide of conduct, a sort of deity within us."

Hamlet saw conscience as a restraint against wrongdoing; Milton saw it as an "umpire"; Aquinas as "the pedagogue of the soul"; Locke as simply our own opinion in moral matters; and Byron called it "the oracle of God." Some reduce conscience to the Freudian "superego" or to a mere echo of the social mores. Many people agree with the eighteenth-century philosopher Joseph Butler, who said that "we have a capacity of reflecting upon actions and characters, and making them an object to our thought; and on doing this, we naturally and unavoidably approve some actions, under the peculiar view of their being virtuous and of good desert; and disapprove others, as vicious and of ill desert." Some take this statement to mean that we have within us an innate moral sense to achieve instant ethics, but others deny such a seemingly "automatic" evaluative capacity.

However variegated its definition, conscience carries with it a prodigious weight and authority. "Freedom of conscience" is a kind of shibboleth in our culture. Doing something "for the sake of conscience" (an old phrase in our language) implies a formidable sanction, one that is almost self-justifying. Something done "in good conscience" has a *prima-facie* case going for it, whereas something done "in bad conscience" portends corruption. The word "conscience" is a common and forceful word in our moral vocabulary. A systematic ethics must attempt to clarify its meanings.

Etymologically, "conscience" comes to us from the Latin *conscientia*, a word that is translated in two distinct ways in English: "conscience" or "consciousness." This dual meaning of *conscientia* evolved gradually as we came to reserve "conscience" for the moral sphere, devising the term "consciousness" for the nonmoral field of awareness. In *Conscience and Its Right to Freedom*, Eric D'Arcy points
out: "In Greek, as in Latin and French, a single word serves both purposes; one is left to decide from the context whether or not in a given place it has a moral connotation." In English, moral awareness has its own unique verbal standing in the word "conscience."

Conscience is moral consciousness at work. Our definition of conscience is this: Conscience is the conscious self as attuned to moral values and disvalues in the concrete. It is the individual's actual state of sensitivity or insensitivity to the worth of persons and their environment. It is moral orientation toward value. The term "conscience" does not describe the activity of persons as they speculatively contemplate moral issues in which they are not involved. The term has a reference to the concrete order of experience in which the self is existentially implicated. One does not have a conscience problem about someone else's moral quandary unless one is involved in that quandary in some way.

One's conscience, one's moral consciousness, can be sympathetic and become involved simply by considering an ethical case. Affectivity is not excluded and pure detachment from any human problem is unlikely. It is easy and natural for us to be implicated in value questions when we study them and feel their relevance to our own moral situations. Because conscience is the awareness of moral reality, it is aroused when one perceives moral truth. But conscience is not just a matter of intellectual knowledge, of "knowing" that some things are right or wrong. A good conscience is a cultivated heart-felt knowledge, an affective awareness of moral value. It is like an acquired, learned instinct, fallible but instructive.

The key to understanding conscience is to see it as the conscious self in the actual state of moral awareness. This perception necessitates both a knowledge of the moral history of the self and a critical assessment of how the elements of ethical method are represented in the workings of conscience. As spontaneous as it might appear, conscience implies ethical reflection or, at least, some moral foreknowledge. Regarding our wheel model of ethical method, we need to stress that conscience should, with increasing sensitivity and thoroughness, represent all the evaluational elements appropriated by the valuing person. Nicolas Berdyaev is correct when he says that ethics should be "a critique of pure conscience." Conscience is not so much one of the parts of ethics as it is an ethical method embodied in a person. Ethics should seek to purify not just reason but all that a morally evaluating self is, and that includes all the evaluational resources of the ethical wheel model. Conscience is best served when an ethics is as complete as possible. Ethics should help conscience to become as fully conscious of moral reality as one can be.

Conscience is not an extraneous imposition on one's moral personality. There is a conscience in every one of us, although in varying de-
grees of development. Conscience is rooted in the foundational moral experience into which no one who approximates human normalcy is totally uninitiated. As we have seen in chapter 1, the foundational moral experience consists of an appreciation of the value of persons and their environment on this nourishing earth. Conscience grows out of the process of this humanizing experience. No two processes will be identical and neither will any two consciences. But they will not be so totally different that we cannot find agreement on various issues.

Conscience always bears the distinguishing marks of each person’s unique moral history. However, every conscience has something fundamentally in common with all others. Each has its roots in the core of the foundational moral experience. Although a developed conscience is not innate in us, the human potential for relating to others and to moral value is. Conscience gives form to this potential and to our natural status as social, morally conscious beings. It is the product of our decisions, education, and formative personal encounters.

**Relating Conscience to the Art/Science of Ethics...**

Good conscience involves a conscious concern for all the various elements represented by the hub and spokes of the wheel model. To illustrate the point, let us briefly turn to the ethical method in this book, and see how conscience relates to the whole method we have been unfolding.

First, conscience relates to the reality-revealing questions in the expository phase of ethics. The consciences of persons are marked by greater or lesser empirical sensitivity. If we have the habit of inquisitiveness in the face of moral decisions, our conscience will be marked by a readiness to ask and pursue questions. If we have experience with diverse moral issues, we will be better able to perceive distinctions when there are differences. The hub of the wheel model is intended to enhance the empirical sensitivity of conscience by helping us develop the skill to pursue the right questions. The morally inquisitive mind is a prerequisite to the growth of conscience and can prepare us to meet our many decisions that are nearly instantaneous. The more we are conscious of the expository questions — the what, the why, the how, the foreseeable effects, and so forth — the more astute questioning is “second nature” to us, the better alerted we are to moral circumstances and the better is our conscience.

Unfortunately, some moral problems do not give us the time to sit down and systematically pursue at leisure all the reality-revealing questions, or to be systematically attentive to the role of the spokes. A well-educated conscience can help us here. It is an acquired moral awareness that includes an ability to respond to the immediacy of situations because it has indeed become second nature to the morally
prepared self. Like the creative mind, conscience too must be prepared
to respond to moral urgency. Thus the more we reflect ethically, the
greater chance do we have to act in good conscience.

The growth of conscience also relates to the evaluational phase
of ethics. Because the spokes enable us to be critically aware of the
personal and social resources that enter into moral decision making,
conscience should embody the moral awareness that we gain through
the proper use of each spoke.

For example, the spoke on creativity should play a vital role in
the stimulation of one’s conscience. As the morally conscious self,
conscience should exemplify this distinctively human capacity. The
developed conscience is not a judge that sits and passes verdicts of right
and wrong on situations as they arise. Rather, it shows a responsive
awareness and attitude toward the moral possibilities buried in a sit-
uation. Good conscience has the skill of discovery and inventiveness.
Animated by a creative spirit, it has the strength to discern alternatives
in moral situations where the less creative would be at a loss.

Conscience is a virtue, the virtue of moral perceptiveness. It is the
cultured and skilled attitude of the mind to perceive what is morally
right and to act on it. This virtue forms the basis of the word “con-
scientiousness.” Conscience is the personalized awareness that we are
indeed more than the total of the social influences that condition our
attitudes and behavior. Through a living conscience we can realize that
there are times when we can rise up against societal standards, as many
persons with good conscience did in Nazi Germany and in the early
civil rights movement in the United States. Developed conscience en-
dows us with the courage of moral dissent and with the hope that
moral perception will be effected in others. Conscience is a developed
awareness of the foundational moral experience, of the mystery of the
moral worth of persons and their environment. It is the force that will
save this planet if saved it is to be. Conscience is the force that should
animate all human institutions. In fact, it is the only thing that marks
them out as “human.” Machines can be efficient; only persons can be
conscientious.

**On Always Following One’s Conscience...**

If conscience is so esteemed, if it is so ethically important and central,
is it always right to follow one’s conscience? Can we always be certain
that our consciences are right or even well formed? These questions
have bothered ethicists for centuries. The question of always following
one’s conscience surfaces implicitly in a lot of contemporary rhetoric
about the rights of conscience, implying that an individual conscience
has absolute rights above all others.

The questions and the ideas contained here are misleading. Obvi-
ously it can be said, at least in a general way, that one must act in accord with one’s conscience. Conscience is not something we change willy-nilly like TV channels. If we are conscientiously convinced that something is morally wrong, we should avoid it; if we are conscientiously convinced that something is morally right, we should act on it. If conscience is the conscious moral self, contradicting it in behavior would violate one’s own integrity and be an assault on one’s moral convictions. Not to act in accord with one’s conscience would cause within the personality that painful fissure called guilt. From this point of view, then, it is always right to follow one’s conscience.

But there are misleading implications in the notion of always following one’s conscience. The idea might not suggest sufficient recognition of the fact that conscience is fallible. Human beings are fallible. Ethics is fallible and so too is conscience. This fact should prompt some reservations about the absolute hegemony of conscience. Conscience is not to be conceived of as an independent supreme court with irrefutable judicial powers that must always be followed and never criticized by oneself or others. Many evildoers and fools act “in good conscience.” We can fool ourselves with a conscience that has been seduced and conscience can become a slave of self-serving rationalization. Conscience should not avoid looking into moral matters as honestly and as fully as possible. It should also be attentive to the evaluative qualities of affec-tivity and group experience.

Good conscience has powerful antennae and is regularly alerted to the signals available to it from our counterparts in the community of persons. Conscience is not just “individual” in us. It is also social. Genuine conscience lives in dialogue. It is indeed in conscience that the one takes its stand vis-à-vis the many, but the individual and personal nature of conscience does not mean me against them. It means me distinct from them but intrinsically and naturally with them. To the general statement that one should always follow one’s conscience it should be added that one should also always question one’s conscience. Conscience is not completely autonomous. No conscience is an island.

Do Societies or Institutions Have Consciences?...

Though conscience is primarily a term of personal moral consciousness, we can speak of the conscience of a society or nation. This adaptive use of the term would refer to those distinguishable traits that mark a society with notable sensitivities or insensitivities. We speak, in a similar way, of the character of a people. Certain moral values seem to be more highly prized in some cultures than in others and in some professions than in others. In looking to a nation’s awareness of moral values, that is, in looking to a nation’s conscience, one would naturally seek to discern its attitudes toward other nations with different values. Individual
freedom, for example, enjoys high esteem in American society, a notion that contributes to an American attitude toward countries with contrary norms. The legal profession is understandably marked by a highly developed sense of due process and fair play. The study of group conscience is of considerable usefulness, since individual conscience will, to a great extent, reflect the strengths and weaknesses of the group. It is sometimes easier to get perspective this way and to admit moral weaknesses when we see them in their communal context.