

*Conscience: A Philosophical History*  
Steven DeLay

Conscience is central to the human condition and our understanding of that condition. What is its origin and purpose? What does it disclose? And how? Historically, it has been conceived in many ways, whether as an innate faculty responsible for the capacity to know right from wrong (the Hebrew Prophets), as voice of divine guidance (Socrates), as ontological hallmark of our individuality (Heidegger), or as internalization of society's restrictive pressures and prejudices or parental admonishment (Freud). This rich reception raises many issues. It is, first, a matter of individual responsibility and morality. What, for example, does the capacity to draw moral judgments on its basis reveal about what it is to be the unique selves each of us is? It also, second, is a phenomenon of social, communal, and political significance. What, for example, does it mean to have our actions laid bare before others for moral and rational assessment as social and political beings? And, finally, it is a spiritual matter, too, as it discloses us before God. How, then, does conscience lay us bare before ourselves, others, and God? From Plato to Kant and Fichte, from Rousseau, Mill, Nietzsche and Freud, or the Prophets and Apostles to Heidegger, this book traces the history of the concept of conscience's formation, highlighting how the capacity to hear and heed its voice forms the heart of man.

Phenomenology has long been interested in the "question of the subject," of what it is to be an individual self. It also has long been interested in how the history of philosophy conceptualized the meaning of what it is to be one. Conscience is crucial to the phenomenon of self, and thus this book undertakes an explication of it. Phenomenology, after all, which is interested in the phenomenon of self and the history of philosophy's treatment of that phenomenon, should offer an account of the concept of conscience and trace the historical transformations that concept has undergone. There are many aspects to the phenomenon. For instance, conscience locates us in a social space, where we can be held rationally and morally accountable to others, and where we can participate in political community. So, too, it is the locus of ethical judgment and action. And of course, it often has been associated with our standing before God.

Conscience, however, has been interpreted in many competing ways across the history of philosophy. As time has passed, one general trend uniting these various accounts has been to cast doubt on what we ordinarily think about conscience—their disagreements notwithstanding, such accounts are revisionist. In undertaking a phenomenological history of the concept of conscience, this book will recount some of the notable views of conscience as articulated from antiquity to today. And, in doing so, it will be an effort in ferrying us to what Paul Ricœur called the "second naïveté." Ordinarily, we assume originally that the conscience endows us with the ability to discriminate from right and wrong. Conscience, we assume, is concerned with facts about ourselves and the world that are emblematic of our free and conscious capacity to act as moral and cognitive subjects. Many accounts of conscience (Nietzsche's and Freud's, for example) challenge this naïve view. Beginning with the naïve view that we hold before any philosophical scrutiny, this book will show how the history of philosophy has questioned that view. Tracing the progression of revisionist views, it culminates in an assessment of the hermeneutics of suspicion. Contrary to what these interpretations claim, conscience, so the book concludes, indeed reveals who we genuinely are. Our naivety was always already justified, for conscience discloses our true standing toward others, ourselves, and God.

**Part I  
Antiquity**

Sophocles  
Plato  
Aristotle  
Plutarch  
Seneca

**Part II  
Middle Ages**

Abelard  
Bonaventure  
Aquinas  
Teresa of Avila

**Part III  
Modernity**

Machiavelli  
Pierre Bayle  
Descartes  
Locke  
Rousseau  
Kant and Fichte  
Schopenhauer  
J.S. Mill

**Part III  
Postmodernity**

Nietzsche  
Freud and Lacan  
Blondel  
Heidegger  
Lyotard  
Ricœur

**Epilogue  
Eternity**

The Prologue to John