

Conscience

Steven DeLay

Contents

Part I

Antiquity

Plato
Aristotle
Plutarch
Seneca

Part II

Middle Ages

Abelard
Bonaventure
Aquinas
Teresa of Avila

Part III

Modernity

Machiavelli
Pierre Bayle
Fénelon
Descartes
Locke

Reid

Rousseau
Kant
Fichte
Schopenhauer
J.S. Mill

Part IV

Postmodernity

Nietzsche
Freud
Blondel
Scheler
Heidegger
Arendt
Weil
Murdoch
Ricœur

Epilogue

Eternity

The Prologue to John

Introduction

“God speaks to the heart,”¹ writes Michel Henry in *Words of Christ*. Appearing near the end of this magisterial last text completed shortly before the author’s death at the age of eighty in 2002, the statement expresses succinctly the defining and pivotal insight of the French philosopher’s entire *phénoménologie de la vie* developed over the span of seven decades. For according to Henry, the human condition’s essence resides in our interior relation to God, in our capacity to hear the Word of God responsible for having engendered us as the living individuals we are. Underscoring the observation in the same work’s following penultimate chapter, the heart, says Henry once again, “is the only adequate definition of the human.”² Reminiscent in this way of Dostoevsky, such a statement undoubtedly represents a drastic counterpoint to contemporary culture’s post-Enlightenment, secular understanding of what it is to be human. And yet, far from this provocatively theocentric, indeed Christological, conception of consciousness being either speculative or even simply baseless, Henry insists it is experientially attestable. While it is a phenomenon his analyses resist invoking by name due to what for their purposes are various potentially misleading connotations with which the phenomenon is associated, the philosophical tradition comes closest to recognizing Henry’s unique phenomenological notion of life with its own understanding of the phenomenon of conscience—conscience, a phenomenon in Latin termed *conscientia* and in Greek *syneidēsis* (συνείδησις). In French, the sole term *conscience* refers both to what English splits into two separate terms: consciousness and conscience. On this point, here the Latin etymology is instructive. Translating literally into “knowledge within oneself,” the term *conscientia* captures the unique mode of knowledge characterizing the consciousness of oneself, in short, a self-consciousness that itself is the mark of all consciousness as such. As Sartre observes in *Being and Nothingness* so famously, every consciousness is at once a consciousness of itself. And if here with Henry, then, we aim to vindicate the view that we are indeed defined at heart in our interior relation to God, understanding how this is the case requires not only an examination of the way in which consciousness is consciousness of itself, but how it thereby is also a consciousness of God. In the resulting analysis of the manner in which we are defined essentially by our life in God, an accounting of the phenomenon of conscience’s role in consciousness, in all its forms, whether it be the consciousness of oneself, others, or ultimately God, is as inevitable as it is paramount. To be sure, no small task!

Complicating the task considerably, to begin with, is the fact that although conscience is a phenomenon, it is a phenomenon whose concept has a history, a history replete with many transformations and perturbations. Not every text speaking of conscience means the same thing by the term. As it happens, and for reasons we shall explore in some detail, the concept of conscience has undergone many competing interpretations throughout the history of philosophy. Despite the multitude of ways in which the phenomenon has been characterized, over time, however, a general trend has discernibly emerged, one uniting otherwise various accounts under a single umbrella, precisely to the extent that they all in their own ways call into question what we think about conscience ordinarily or naively—their disagreements notwithstanding, such accounts are revisionist in seeking to undermine or unsettle the everyday conviction according to which conscience discloses infallible, unmediated, and universal truth—in short, truths about ourselves and others in light of the truth of God. In calling to mind criticisms of such a view, the thought of Freud and Nietzsche are representative. But there are others, too, for the nineteenth and twentieth century’s “masters of suspicion” did not emerge *ex nihilo*. Hence, in undertaking a

phenomenological history of the concept of conscience, naturally this work will expound some of the most notable views of conscience that have been articulated beginning in antiquity and down to the present day. At the same time, doing so will itself be an exercise in ferrying us out to the sea of suspicion and back again to the harbor of what Paul Ricœur called the *seconde naïveté*. Ordinarily, whether we conceive of it as a faculty or habit, we in any case assume conscience suitably empowers us to discriminate between right and wrong. Conscience, we believe, illuminates facts about ourselves and the situations in which we find ourselves, facts that accordingly are themselves emblematic of our possessing the free and conscious capacity to act truthfully and responsibly as moral and rational selves. However, many accounts of conscience (Nietzsche's and Freud's as mentioned) challenge this conception of both consciousness and conscience. Taking as our point of departure the naïve view held prior to any philosophical scrutiny, this work will scrutinize how the history of philosophy has in turn challenged it. Tracing the historical progression of this latent revisionism that eventually was rendered explicit, doing so at the same time affords the opportunity to reflect critically on the hermeneutics of suspicion itself. For contrary to what revisionist interpretations claim to reveal about the human condition, the conscience, so it will be argued, indeed discloses who we genuinely are. Our naivety was always already justified, for conscience reveals our actual standing toward ourselves, others, and God.

Thus, there is no doubting conscience is central to the human condition and our understanding of it. Still, questions arise. What is its origin and purpose? What does it disclose? And how? Although any historical schema will be imperfect to the extent that it must be incomplete, broadly speaking, the history of the concept of conscience can be usefully divided into four familiar periods: Ancient, Medieval, Modern, and Postmodern. Historically, it has been conceived in numerous ways, whether as an innate capacity responsible for the ability to discern right from wrong (the Hebrew Prophets), as a voice of divine guidance (Socrates), as an internal tribunal whereby we pass judgment on ourselves by way of reason (Kant and German Idealism), as the ontological hallmark of our capacity for authentic individuality (Heidegger), or as an internalization of society's repressive norms and mores (Freud). This rich and variegated conceptual reception only serves to underscore the phenomenon's remarkable pertinence to multiple dimensions of philosophical interest. It is, perhaps first above all, a matter of our 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 selves each of us is? It also, second, is an item of social, communal, and political significance. What, for example, does it mean to have our actions laid bare before others for moral and rational appraisal as social and political beings? And, of course, 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 and Mill to Nietzsche and Freud, from the Prophets and Apostles to Heidegger, this work traces the evolution of the concept of conscience's formation, in turn highlighting how the capacity to hear, and so heed, its voice forms the heart of man.

A final preliminary word is necessary. It must be noted that the account of conscience this work aims to undertake appears to exhibit a paradox threatening from the outset to render that very undertaking superfluous. For if one of this work's central tenets is correct about our always already having heard the truth conscience discloses, what remains left unsaid to communicate that has not already been heard? By virtue of performing and accomplishing its

task, conscience would accordingly render any need for its analysis moot. As understandable as this objection may be, there is a solution. After all, phenomenology illuminates what was otherwise inapparent, either because we were failing to pay attention to what was obvious already, or was being obscured by confusions and distortions. When it does so, phenomenology brings to light what becomes obvious. But the restoration of the phenomenon's obviousness in no way lessens its significance. If we too often overlook what is closest to us and thus should be most obvious but is not, are not the depths of our conscience a case in point? By bringing clarity to conscience, the words of this text in the last analysis simply respond to the Word that has spoken and has been heard, and to which they respond. All our words only glide along the surface of a silent depth, an inexhaustible well from which they incessantly draw—the Word. While reading those to come, may you hear it too!

Part I

Antiquity

Aristotle—community “knowledge in common or with others”

Sophocles

- 1) Divine spark (unmediated, infallible, intuitive)
- 2) court, tribunal, judgment, principle (juridical)
- 3) faculty of reason (conscience determines what is right, rather than apprehends what is right, i.e., it legislates)
- 4) “all too human”: internalization of societal norms, “bad faith,” etc.

“split self”—alienation (not natural intuition of what was always already there, but a pathology, an “intruder”)

Not an “inner witness” but a “false accuser” (no longer privileged or indubitable)

Conscience does not give testimony, but spews slander.

“Guilty!” is not a judgment

Conscientia

Syneidesis syneidēsis

“judicial” assessment of a past deed

“legislative” dictates for the future

Judgment of past actions—exhortations—commands (moral law)

Synderesis—neologism from Jerome on Ezekiel

“spark of conscience” (*scintilla conscientiae*)

Syneidesis cannot be lost

Quadpartate souls—reason, spirit, desire, synderesis

Part II

Middle Ages

Conscience (Philip Chancellor)—application of a general moral principle that is the outcome of deliberation

Bonaventure

Conscience—cognitive

Synderesis—affective

“inexhaustible inclination toward achieving the good” (desire for the good)

Natural law

Moral knowledge—intellect—conscience

Moral inclination—will—synderesis

“innate capacity to grasp the first principles of practical reason as true”

“deontic propositions of the natural law”

Augustine—“natural light” “natural tribunal” (*City of God*, 11.27)

“darkness of blindness, wantonness of pleasure, hardness of obstinacy”

Aquinas

“infallible moral awareness”

Synderesis—practical intellect (natural habit, not a power)

Syllogistic (major/minor premises)

Conscience—act of judgment (“binds” and “incites”)

“correct conscience” “erroneous conscience”

“vicious customs”

Ockham

Eliminates synderesis because morality, which rests purely on God’s freedom, is accordingly contingent

Part III
Modernity

Part IV
Postmodernity

Epilogue
Eternity

Notes

Chapter One

- 1 Michel Henry, *Words of Christ*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2012), 94.
- 2 Henry, *Words of Christ*, 107.