**Conscience**

**Revision Notes**



**The Bible and Conscience**

The Old Testament has no word for ‘conscience’, but it does speak of the true heart that interiorizes the divine law. Some Old Testament figures experience God calling them to live his will or Law; at other times they experience him probing or judging their hearts. Jesus taught his followers to have a pure heart:

*God blesses those whose hearts are pure, for they will see God.* Matthew 5:8

*What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean', but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean' ... the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean'.* Matthew 15:11,18

*This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God.* 1 John 3:19-21

Paul uses the term συνειδησις - often translated as 'conscience' and 'heart' - to describe the human ability to know and choose the good. He taught that all people, whether or not they are Christians, know what is right and wrong. He said it is written on our hearts:

*When outsiders who have never heard of God's law follow it more or less by instinct, they confirm its truth by their obedience. They show that God's law is not something alien, imposed on us from without, but woven into the very fabric of our creation. There is something deep within them that echoes God's yes and no, right and wrong. (Romans 2:14,15, The Message).* [*More Translations*](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans%202:14-16;&version=64;)

For Paul, conscience is the universal knowledge of God's law, an inner guiding of our external behaviour. Our conscience can be corrupted, but through Christ's redeeming love, and the action of the Holy Spirit, we can 'put on the mind of Christ'.

**Aquinas**

Aquinas held **reason** in the highest esteem. He said "Reason in man is rather like God in the world." Most famously, Aquinas claimed:

*To disparage the dictate of reason is equivalent to condemning the command of God.*

Augustine had used the term 'synderesis' to mean an innate knowledge of right and wrong. He held that this was faulty, due to the fall, and that Christians should look to the authority of the Church and Scripture. Aquinas disagreed, holding that conscience has binding force.

Aquinas thought that practical reason, through reflection on human nature, can determine primary moral principles (which he called the 'Primary Precepts'). Our 'conscience' then derives secondary principles ('Secondary Precepts') which are applied. As we practice balancing our needs against the needs of others, we develop Prudence.

**Synderesis** - an innate knowledge of human nature and primary precepts through practical reason

**Conscientia** - deriving secondary precepts, and applying them

**Prudence** - the virtue of right-reasoning in moral matters, balancing ours and others' needs

As with Paul, Aquinas said that a person's conscience could err (go wrong), either 'invincibly', through no fault of their own, or 'vincibly' - through our own fault. For example, if I give money to a man who is begging on the streets, I have good intentions, but my actions are actually unhelpful. If I had considered my actions carefully, I would have seen that I wasn't helping him to improve his situation - if anything, my actions would keep him on the streets longer. I erred 'vincibly', as I would have done differently if I'd thought about it.

Imagine if I'd given the money instead to a homeless charity, who would be able to help this man to find accommodation, help conquering his addictions etc. A much better thing to do. However, I did not know that workers at this charity were abusing the homeless people in their care. Supporting the charity was actually the wrong thing to do, but I couldn't have known this - I erred or got it wrong 'invincibly' - it wasn't my fault.

A different example - the bombing of Dresden. The British government terror bombed Dresden, killing up to 60,000 innocent people. This is a vincible error, as they should have known it was wrong - it was their fault, and they are responsible for what happened.

However, consider a bomb dropped on a weapons factory. Unknown to the British forces, a school was hidden under the factory. It was wrong to bomb the school, but this is invincible error, as it wasn't the fault of the British in this scenario - they couldn't have known about the school.

This example also illustrates what Aquinas thought about Conscience. It isn't a 'feeling' in your heart, like the guilt you feel when confronted with a homeless man. It is the process of reasoning, moving from the Primary Precepts (such as 'It is right to protect and preserve the innocent') to secondary precepts (such as 'It is wrong to give money to people who beg on the streets').

**Butler**

**Natural Guide**

Butler was a Bishop in the Church of England. He believed, as Aquinas did, that we have a God-given ability to reason. Butler would say that we must listen to our conscience because it allows us to act as a moral judge. It is not an intuitive feeling about what is right - instead, it is an ability to use reason to weigh up factors in a moral decision.

Conscience does not only offer itself to show us the way we should walk in, but it. likewise carries its own authority with it, that it is **our natural guide**, the guide assigned us by the Author of our nature: it therefore belongs to our condition of being: it is our duty to walk in that path, and follow this guide

**Ultimate Authority**

Butler says we have a number of influences, but the conscience should not be seen as merely one among many drives or passions. The conscience should have ultimate authority over all of our instincts.

That principle by which we survey, and either approve or disapprove our own heart, temper, and actions, is not only to be considered as what is in its turn to have some influence; which may be said of every passion, of the lowest appetites: but likewise as being superior; as from its very nature manifestly claiming superiority over all others... **Had it strength, as it has right; had it power, as it has manifest authority, it would absolutely govern the world.**

**Newman**

Newman was an Anglican theologian who converted to Roman Catholicism and became a Cardinal. Newman's view on the conscience can be seen as intuitionist, which makes his approach quite different from Butler and Aquinas. He says that our conscience is "the voice of God" completely distinct from our will or desires. It is an innate principle planted in us before we had the ability to reason.

**A law of the mind**

Newman described conscience as a 'law of the mind', but he did not see it as giving us commandments to follow. The conscience is not a set of rules, a feeling of guilt or something that we obey in order to gain a reward from God. It is a clear indication of what is right:

It was not a dictate, nor conveyed the notion of responsibility, of duty, of a threat and a promise...

Newman is often quoted as saying he would drink a toast to the Pope, but to the conscience first. Seeing the full quote, this is an unfortunate epitaph, as Newman wasn't about to drink to either:

Certainly, if I am obliged to bring religion into after-dinner toasts, (which indeed does not seem quite the thing) **I shall drink to the Pope, if you please, still, to Conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards**.

Newman was merely saying, like Butler and Aquinas before him, that the conscience should have ultimate authority.

**Freud**

Freud was a psychiatrist most famous for founding the psychoanalytic school of psychology. Two key aspects of his approach are the assertion that sexual desire is the prime motivating drive in all humans, and the importance of the unconscious mind.

Freud's theory of the conscience is entirely at odds with all of the positions above. He saw the conscience as part of the unconscious mind, and believed that it arose as a result of bad experiences early in life, as well as disapproval from parents and society. This negative aspect of the human psyche, part of and sometimes equated with the 'superego', is not usually in control of our actions, or not in those with healthy minds. Freud taught that 'ego', our conscious personality, usually balanced the pull of the 'id' (our desires) and the 'superego' (our guilt).

To be ruled by your superego would make you overly judgmental, inflexible and irrational. Freud would argue against allowing the conscience to have control over our decisions about how to act.

**Piaget**

Many psychologists have come to question Freud's understanding of the conscience, and see a well-developed conscience as part of a healthy human mind. However, most continue to reject the notion of a God-given conscience. Piaget was a developmental psychologist. He believed that by studying human behaviour, you could see how conscience develops over time. It certainly isn't something that humans are born with. He highlighted four developmental stages:

* 0-2 years. During this stage, babies would learn about the world around them through their senses and by moving about. They become able to differentiate themselves from the world around them, and learn about the permanence of objects.
* 2-7 years. During this stage, children develop language, although they find it hard to see the world from a viewpoint other than their own. They classify things by single shared features.
* 8-11 years. They are able to think logically to develop explanations about the world around them.
* 11-15 year. They can reason using abstract concepts. They begin to think about the future, the hypothetical and ideological issues.

According to this model, a person doesn't have a fully functioning conscience before the age of 11.

**Catholic Church**

*In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths.* VATICAN II, Gaudium et spes §16.

*The individual conscience is accorded the status of a supreme tribunal of moral judgment which hands down categorical and infallible decisions about good and evil. To the affirmation that one has a duty to follow one’s conscience is unduly added the affirmation that one’s moral judgment is true merely by the fact that it has its origin in the conscience. But in this way the inescapable claims of truth disappear, yielding their place to a criterion of sincerity, authenticity and ‘being at peace with oneself,’ so much so that some have come to adopt a radically subjectivist conception of moral judgment.* Pope John Paul II, Veritatis Splendor (1993) §32.

**Philosophers Views on Conscience and the Strength and Weaknesses of the Arguments:**

St Paul

In the New Testament the Greek word used for conscience is synderesis. This is the pain suffered by the one who goes against his or her moral principle. In Romans 2:15 Paul described the conscience as the witness to the requirements of the law being written on the hearts of those who are not under the law. In other words the conscience acts as a guide even where specific moral principles are not taken into consideration.

**Strengths**

It can be argued that St Paul’s conscience theory can be followed regardless of religious beliefs

**Criticisms**

Some people may argue that St Paul’s idea of the conscience is undeveloped therefore making it inchoate. There is no evidence to back up what he is saying as any reference to the conscience in the bible can only be referred to St Paul’s biblical writings.

Thomas Aquinas

St Thomas Aquinas believed that the conscience was a device or faculty for distinguishing right from wrong through use of reason. He believed that it is a natural part of mental activity and provides an individual with moral guidance.

He argued that there are 2 parts to making a moral decision:

* The synderesis: This is the right reason, the awareness of being able to do good and prevent evil
* The conscienta: it distinguishes between right and wrong applies this knowledge and makes the moral decision

Although he thought that people basically tended towards the good He also believed that sometimes working out what good and evil things were was the main problem.

Aquinas claimed that there are 2 ways of behaving badly:

* To do what is known to be wrong
* To go against one’s conscience

Aquinas thought that the reason people sometimes did evil deeds was because they had made a mistake and their conscience was mistaken. He believed that those who did wrong pursued an apparent good and not a real good. He believed that the error was to be treated in one of the following two ways:

* A factual mistake were the individual did not know that a general rule applied to a particular situation (i.e. the individual is not responsible for the wrongdoing)
* A mistake that was due to ignorance (i.e. the person is responsible for the wrongdoing)

For Aquinas conscience is the act of applying our knowledge of good and evil to what we do. He believed that the conscience derived its authority from God. God can and does also supernaturally reveal what is and is not in accordance with his will. Our conscience is our realisation that what we might do or have done is good or not but is not the actual doing or choosing.

Therefore one cannot do the right thing if one does not know what the right thing is.

From this Aquinas therefore concluded that only one is excused from wrong doing if one’s conscience is in error one is also bound to do the wrong thing if one’s conscience tells one that it is the right thing to do.

**Strengths**

* Aquinas has shown how all humanity can reason right and wrong yet make wrong decisions and as such retained a degree of accountability for one’s actions unlike Butler’s conscience theory.
* His theory can also be followed regardless of religious beliefs therefore it can be argued that all people can be held to be morally responsible.
* It agrees with Piaget’s idea that the conscience is manufactured from experiences and conditioning as Aquinas argued that children do not have fully formed conscience

**Criticisms**

* It can be argued that following our conscience can lead us to make a moral decision and that reason can also result us to making different decisions.
* Butler will argue that the conscience should always be followed no matter what unlike Aquinas who says that the conscience can be mistaken or misguided

Butler

Butler believed that humans share a human nature and that morality is simply a mater of following human nature. He believed that humans were influenced by self-love (desire for happiness for the self) and benevolence (desire for the happiness of others).

Butler suggests that the conscience adjudicates between these two interests and it behaves as a guide. The conscience is a gift from God and has the absolute supreme & ultimate authority in ethical judgement and its role is to show the way towards the good. It then directs us towards focusing on the benevolence and away from self-love. For butler it is an intrinsic part of human nature and to dismiss morality (which psychologists like Freud & Piaget does) is to deny that intrinsic part of human nature.

Butler also believed that the conscience is our guide to moral behaviour, put there by God and must be obeyed. Butler believed that if the conscience instructs us to act in a certain way then you should not even consider alternatives, as it is adequate justification to behave in that way. You must obey the conscience unquestionably

**Strengths**

* Some Christians will agree with Butlers ideas about the conscience, as it is a valid moral argument, for the existing believers, as a rational evidence to support the idea that God exists (or the belief of God).
* **G.E Moore** also believed and wrote that “ Good cannot be defined yet people know what it means implying some innate sense or intuition” also suggesting that there must be some inner sense of good and evil in what Butler suggest to be our conscience.
* **F Hutcheson** also argue that it is was people’s natural sense of benevolence not reason which is the source of morality. He also believed that the natural response at the suffering of others indicate an innate human morality. This also complies with Butler’s idea that humans were influenced by benevolence & it is intrinsic part of human nature and to dismiss morality is to deny that intrinsic part of human nature.

**Criticisms**

* Some people may argue against Butler’s idea that the conscience has absolute authority as some people can use it to justify any action. It is also conceivable that intuitive conscience could be misleading or misinformed. Aquinas may also argue that the conscience may be mislead or misinformed even though some of his ideas about the conscience complies with Butler’s theory of the conscience.
* It could also be argued that Peoples’ ideas of morality is different and could lead to moral anarchy therefore questioning whether the conscience should be followed at all times.
* Even though his theory is a valid moral argument for believers it can also be argued that it raises severe problems for God especially in respect of evil as some people do the vilest things in the name of conscience.
* Atheists may also argue against Butler’s theory as they could also claim that the conscience is important to them with no need of a supernatural element in their decision making.

Freud

Freud’s theory about the development of the conscience is based on his beliefs about the development of the adult mind. He argued that the human mind is split into 3 parts:

ID: Basic instincts and ancient desires such as hunger. This is present at birth

Ego: This balances the ID and the super Ego, perceptions of the external that makes us aware of the “Reality Principle” one’s most outward part and personality. The socialisation of the individual involves the repression of natural but anti-social desires.

Super Ego: The feelings of disapproval of society are internalised to form the super Ego and restricts the instinctive behaviour of the individual. It reflects anger and disapproval of other making a guilty conscience to be created which grows into a life and power of its own, irrespective of the rational thought of the individual

Freud therefore believed that the conscience is pre rational and the inevitable outcome of conflict and aggression. The conflicts caused by the creation of the super- Ego lead to the creation of a guilty conscience that develops into a powerful force independent of reason and instinct. It leads to feelings of guilt based on the perceived expectation of society.

For Freud conscience cannot be the voice of God because of the different opinions on ethical issues as it is the super-ego of the mind (a moral policeman) developed during the phallic stage of childhood. He therefore argued that in order for the psyche to be healthy, there must be a balance between the ego and the super Ego. For Freud, the Christian conscience is bad for a person’s mental health because of the rules and taboos it imposes. Freud’s concept of the conscience is therefore psychoanalytical, a part of the unconscious mind.

**Strengths**

* It can be argued that the psychology argument works with people with or without religious faith therefore all people can be held morally accountable.
* Piaget also believed as well as Freud that the conscience is manufactured from experiences and conditioning
* Psychology has evidence to support Freud’s ideas about the conscience and has even developed his ideas into the two level conscience. Like Piaget, Freud’s theory of the conscience is also based on research therefore having evidence to support his ideas unlike Aquinas, Paul and Butler conscience theory

**Criticisms**

Much of Freud’s work has been criticised especially the Oedipus complex as his research was based on small samples and some psychologists argue that it is too simplistic. People will consider the Oedipus complex to be strange as at the age of 3-6 yrs most young children are unaware of anything sexual and do not have sexual desires as Freud explains in the phallic stage. People also will argue that a child has physical, and emotional needs rather than sexual needs

Freud’s argument also falls soul of genetic fallacy as just by understanding the psychological and scientific evidence of how things originate does not dismiss religious arguments which Freud tries to do. His argument does not mean that religions ideas are not true as they can both be compactable.

Even though Freud argues that the Christian conscience is bad for a person’s mental health, William James has observed and argued that religion is often the inspiration of outstanding well-balanced individuals whose lives had made a positive mark on history like Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King.

Piaget

Piaget believes that moral sense is developed alongside other cognitive attributes. He saw stages in the moral reasoning linked to the child’s development with two stages in moral development.

* **Heteronymous morality (between ages of 5-11 yrs):** In which rules are obeyed with an expectation of swift punishment for lapses
* **Autonomous morality (10yrs +):** A person begins to develop a personal code of conduct based on perceptions of socially acceptable behaviour patterns and have a more independent decision making process

Piaget believed that most adults use a mixture of these two approaches. When a person becomes less dependant on the views and opinions of others they move from the heteronymous to the autonomous level.

**Strengths**

Religious believers can also be in support of his theory as the psychological argument can be applied to those with or without religious faith therefore all people can held to be morally accountable

**Criticisms**

* Even though Piaget based his ideas on psychological findings, psychologists also argue that his findings were based on flawed data because his experiments failed to take various factors into account. Also further psychological experiments on child development have been claimed to discredit his “Stages of Cognitive development” theory.
* Furthermore although Piaget believes that moral sense is developed alongside other cognitive attributes and explains the origins and developments of the conscience it falls foul of genetic fallacy. This is because knowing and explaining the origins of a theory does not dismiss its religious significance.
* It is also argued that there are 3 stages of moral development including theonomous morality, which Piaget fails to mention. Theonomous morality is based on an understanding of God, which includes situation ethics where agapeic love is theonomous. Religious believers will therefore argue that they obey his rules because of the agapeic love of God and not just the fear of God only.

**Tips for A2 exam questions**

**To what extent is conscience a reliable guide in sexual ethics?**

* You should choose a particular topic from sexual ethics, such as homosexuality, to discuss.
* The tension between trusting conscience to act with integrity against the difficulty of acting impartially in matters of a sexual nature.
* There should be a discussion of Aquinas’ comments about the possible weaknesses of conscience and the danger of ignorance as perhaps illustrated when conscience advises people to go against established moral laws.
* Consideration should be given to whether other moral sources should be used, such as moral laws/teachings, of the situation, and consequences of actions.
* There could be some discussion of the term ‘reliable’ how can we tell whether we are really being driven by our conscience or whether that ‘voice’ is coming from our parents’ teaching, or our own will, or an outmoded religious stance, and so on?

**Assess critically the nature and role of the conscience in ethical decision-making.**

* Explore the different views of conscience, as well as psychological views.
* You could make an evaluation of ethical decision-making in relation to conscience, perhaps with an example.
* You could consider the limitations of conscience when informed by ignorance, as could the possibility of developing or refining it, and the dangers of guilt or the desire to satisfy others overriding reason.
* You might like to consider whether conscience alone is a satisfactory moral authority what about the law, religious teachings?
* You could look at the reliability of conscience and factors that could undermine it.
* Give examples in your discussion illustrating the different moral dimension of action, including consequences, situations, and intentions, as well as psychological, cultural and scientific influences.