**"Conscience is the most reliable guide to ethical decision making." Discuss (35 marks)**

*This A2 answer written by one of my students, Kate, successfully fulfils the assessment criteria for an A\* at A2.  Read my comments in red and find out how.*

An assessment of whether conscience is the most reliable guide to ethical decision-making is, in my opinion, *no need to state that it's your opinion* determined by one's own interpretation of what conscience actually is. There are three key approaches to defining conscience. The most recent,  *Freud isn't the most recent, for exmpale, see the article on this site by David Torevell for some more recent theories, such as Vincent Macnamara's* originally proposed by Freud and developed by Piaget and Fromm, argues that conscience is the result of environmental factors. Freud's definition of conscience is linked to an individual's feelings of guilt and fear of punishment. As such, it could be seen as an unreliable guide to ethical decision-making as it may inspire actions simply to gain approval. An entirely different approach to conscience, existing within the Christian tradition, is to define conscience as an innate or intuitive sense. This view has perpetuated from the early Christian writings of St Paul to Cardinal Newman's work at the end of the 19th Century. Another important proponent of an intuitive conscience was Joseph Butler, who identified conscience as the ultimate moral decision maker. Placed within us by God, it must be obeyed. Although directed towards increasing the happiness of others, it is conceivable that conscience could be misled or misinformed. Therefore, it is not necessarily a reliable guide. It was Aquinas who stated that there were two dimensions to moral decision making: synderesis, an awareness of the moral principle to do good and avoid evil, and conscientia, the power of reason to work out what is good and evil. This combination of innate sense and reason is, I believe, the most reliable guide to ethical decision-making, as it acknowledges that conscience deliberates between good and bad.

*Excellent opening paragraph is almost an essay in itself!  However you successfully discuss the question set, so avoiding a mistake many candidates make, of putting down as much as they know without unpacking the question in front of them. Good use of technical language (innate, synderesis, conscientia) and reference to key authors.  These gain you credit in an exam.*

Freud (1856-1939) believed that the human psyche was inspired by powerful desires that begin at birth and need to be satisfied. These are critical to our behaviour up until the age of three and drive the id. For Freud there were two categories of desire at war within the id: ‘Eros' (the life instinct) and ‘Thanatos' (the death instinct). However, children quickly learn that the world puts restraints upon the degree to which these desires can be met. Humans therefore create the ‘ego', also known as the ‘reality principle', which takes into account the realities of society. The ego creates an awareness of self and others and is crucial to our interaction with the world. The ‘super-ego', which develops from the age of five, internalises and reflects the anger and disappointment of others. It produces feelings of guilt and creates a conscience. This guilty conscience grows into a life and power of its own and is un-reliant upon the rational thought and reflection of the individual. It is programmed into human beings by the negative reactions of other people, making it pre-rational and the inevitable outcome of conflict and aggression. In Freud's model of the conscience, the individual is not choosing to act ethically in order to promote the happiness of others. Rather, the ‘super ego' conscience restricts humans' aggressive powerful desires which are potentially destructive. Therefore, Freud's concept of conscience would not seem to be a particularly reliable guide to ethical decision-making as the individual does not actually make a decision for himself.

*Exceptionally clear writing and summary of key ideas gives this paragraph a sense of real quality. Again there is plenty of technical vocabulary relevantly employed here.*

Piaget, an educational psychologist, modified Freud's theory, stating that conscience has both mature and immature dimensions. The mature conscience is the ego's search for integrity and is concerned with right and wrong. It acts dynamically and responsively to things of value and looks outwards into the world, developing new insights into situations. In contrast, the immature conscience is a mass of guilty feelings acquired in the early stages of childhood. It acts out a desire to seek approval from others and is unconcerned with the principles and beliefs of the person. In conducting a survey on how conscience develops, Piaget discovered that children up to the age of ten judge the rightness or wrongness of an action on the consequences it produces, whereas older children link rightness with motive and intention. Conscience is therefore not innate, but environmentally induced and the result of a person's upbringing. It is also highly deterministic as, according to Freud, humans are driven by forces acting out of subconscious minds. Such a conception of conscience could be seen as an unreliable guide. Because the immature conscience is motivated by guilt, instilled at a young age, it may inspire actions purely to gain approval. It blindly obeys, following feelings rather than reason. It is backward-looking and the amount of guilt produced is not always relative to the importance of the action. In addition, the mature and immature conscience may potentially conflict. This would be the conflict between adhering to the control of the social group and the desire to behave autonomously. Such a conflict may hamper the individual's ability to make clear ethical decisions.

*You might have employed Piaget's technical distinction between the heteronymous (other-directed, under 10 years) and autonomous (self-directed, over 10 years) conscience.*

Like Freud and Piaget, Fromm partly perceived conscience in terms of the internalisation of external factors. He called this the authoritarian conscience. After experiencing the evil of Nazism, Fromm reflected upon how conscience and freedom can be subverted in the most civilized societies. He used the idea of an authoritarian conscience to explain how individuals such as Eichmann can plead that he was only ‘following orders' at his trial for mass murder in 1961 *It is always creditable to use examples to illustrate your point.  Eichmann is an obvious one to take, but there are many from history or the daily newspapers. Be bold in assembling your own illustrations*. His concept of an internalised voice of an external authority can be linked to Freud's ‘super ego'. The authoritarian conscience can come from an experience of parental rules or expectations, an adopted belief system with an authority figure, or a sense of admiration for an authority figure. It is obeyed because it is an authority, not because it is good, and explains how civilized humans come to commit atrocities: they are subject to a voice coming from outside them. Often an individual is spurred on by fear and feels bound to the faults of the authority figure. In most cases, his or her identity and sense of security is wrapped up in the authority figure, as the inner voice becomes someone else's. Furthermore, the individual gives up the right to pass judgement or criticise, losing all sense of [autonomy](javascript:void(0)) and creativity. The key implication of an authoritarian conscience is that the individual takes on the role of authority, becoming his or her own sense of guilt and self-punishment: "He takes on the role of authority by treating himself with the same cruelty and strictness" (Fromm). Clearly, this concept of the authoritarian conscience is a highly unreliable guide to moral decision making, as the individual loses all sense of self, self-worth and originality of thought.

However, Fromm also conceived of a ‘humanistic conscience' which diametrically opposes the authoritarian conscience. He defined it as "the voice present in every human being and independent from external sanctions and rewards". Developed over a lifetime of learning and reflection, this voice is our true self, found by listening to ourselves and heeding our ‘deepest needs, desires and goals'. Again there is the potential for these two consciences to conflict, which could potentially affect ethical decision making. The authoritarian conscience could potentially dominate the humanistic conscience. It would appear difficult for an individual suffering under an authority figure to head there ‘deepest needs, desires and goals'.

*According to Fromm you could quite willingly adopt the authoritarian conscience, for example, by idol-worshipping the authority as Unity Mitford did Adolf Hitler.*

Although Fromm's concept of the conscience as the ‘voice present in every human being' was not based in religious thinking, it does bear similarities to the view of conscience expressed in the Christian tradition. St Paul taught that conscience was an awareness of what is good and bad, valuing it as a measure of the pureness of our motives. In 2 Corinthians 1: 12, Paul states: "for this is what we boast about: our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world with pure and good motives and godly sincerity, without earthly wisdom but with God's grace." For Paul, conscience lay at the centre of our being and was something that all humans have, irrespective of faith. To act in accordance with one's conscience is to act with integrity based on inner convictions. However, in Romans 7 Paul acknowledges that the conscience can be weak or mistaken: "I do the very thing I hate...I can will what is right but I cannot do it." Being true to ourselves can involve struggle and conflict within, sometimes producing feelings of guilt, inadequacy and powerlessness.

The Anglican theologian Joseph Butler (1692-1752) developed the idea of conscience within the Christian tradition, stating in '15 Sermons', 1726: ‘There is a principle of reflection in men by which they distinguish between approval and disapproval of their own actions...this principle in man...is conscience'. For Butler, conscience was the ultimate moral decision maker. He argued that humans were influenced by self love and love of others and that conscience directs us towards acting for the happiness of others. It determines and judges the goodness of actions and is the ultimate authority in ethical decision-making. Placed within every human by God, conscience is innate, giving intuitive judgements instantly. Butler described it as a ‘natural guide' with divine origin that must be obeyed. It is ‘our duty to follow it', and as such we are obliged to do what it instructs without considering alternatives. Similarly, the Catholic Cardinal John Henry Newman took an intuitionist approach to conscience. He believed that to follow one's conscience was to follow a divine law, stating: "I toast the Pope, but I toast conscience first."

This view of a conscience as an innate sense raises the moral question: what happens if our conscience is instructing us to act in a way that most would argue was morally wrong? Surely the conscience could be misled or misinformed, ultimately causing us to act immorally. Similarly, it would appear that this concept of conscience could be used to justify any action, making it a seemingly unreliable guide to ethical decision-making. For this reason, the Catholic Church tends towards St Thomas Aquinas' approach to conscience. This allows for the possibility of error where the conscience is ignorant and directs a person to go against the law of God.

Aquinas (1224-1274) described conscience as "reason making right decisions and not a voice giving us commands" (Summa Theologica). He saw it as a device or faculty used for distinguishing right from wrong actions, believing that humans naturally tend towards the good and away from evil. He called this the ‘ [Synderesis rule](javascript:void(0))': ‘do good and avoid evil'. For Aquinas there were two parts to moral decision making: ‘Synderesis', "a natural disposition of the human mind by which we instinctively understand the first principles of [morality](javascript:void(0))", and ‘Consientia', the "application of knowledge to activity". Whereas ‘synderesis' is an innate and unchanging basic instinct based on one moral principle, ‘consientia' is a moral skill acquired over time used to assess situations and make decisions as to the best way to act morally. ‘Conscientia' is the power of reason working out what is good and what is evil, and has links with Aristotle's concept of ‘ [phronesis](javascript:void(0))' or ‘practical wisdom' and Fromm's humanistic conscience. Aquinas also accepted that the conscience can make mistakes and needs to be trained in the ways of morality, realising that at times people do bad things because they make a mistake in discriminating good from evil. Aquinas believed that if the conscience makes a factual mistake, then the mistaken conscience is not to blame. However, if one is simply ignorant of the rule, choosing to ignore it, then he or she is to blame and has the potential to learn from the mistake. This concept of conscience is important because it more fully acknowledges the individual's active role in moral decision making. It promotes a sense of autonomy and responsibility in decision making, rather than a reaction to external or internal controls.

Thus, while environmental factors such as upbringing and childhood experience must have an impact upon an individual's perception of what is regarded as right and wrong, in terms of ethical decision-making Aquinas' interpretation of conscience would seem to be the most reliable guide. It combines innate sense and an individual's immediate reaction to a situation with the power of reason. The fact that conscience is a moral skill acquired over time and with experience would seem to be a great asset in making ethical decisions. Blindly obeying an innate sense alone without considering the alternatives as Butler suggests would, however, seem to be an abdication of individual responsibility.