

A Conscience

Although the language of conscience (Latin: *conscientia*; Gk: *syneidesis*) was partially inherited from Roman Stoicism, the patristic usage of the terms attempted to reflect Scriptural concepts. For example, Ambrose of Milan wrote of conscience as a reflective self-opening whereby men are encountered and probed by God in grace and in judgment. Since the fathers, Christian accounts of conscience have mainly been shaped by two distinctions.

B Prospective and retrospective conscience

The first distinguishes between whether conscience is prospective (looking towards future action; 'directive') or retrospective (judging past action).

1. Prospective

The medieval period developed the most thorough systematisation of a prospective account of conscience whereby it became an integral aspect of practical reason. Thomas Aquinas first revised Jerome's influential concept of *synteresis* (a linguistic corruption of *syneidesis*) to interpret it as an error-free, innate, human habit which contains the basic principles of natural law and then defined conscience (*conscientia*) as an act (not a faculty) in which these principles are discursively applied to specific situations. As Baylor says, 'Conscience, for [Aquinas], was pre-eminently a part of the operations of the practical intellect as it reasoned to a decision about what should be done in concrete situations that confront the individual.' (M.G. Baylor, *Action and Person: Conscience in Late Scholasticism and the Young Luther*, pp.42) Since, for Aquinas, the conscience can err, subsequent prospective accounts have tended towards a pastoral concern for correcting the conscience so that it gets the application right. This is often, though not necessarily, to the exclusion of conscience's retrospective function and, indeed, any essential reference to God.

2. Retrospective

Accounts which argue for an exclusively retrospective function have traditionally responded to this tendency by repositioning conscience within an explicitly soteriological framework. The fathers characteristically failed to connect conscience to the cross while the scholastic treatments were aiming at an account of created human anthropology. But Luther, the leading proponent of a return to a retrospective conscience, explained conscience as basic to a person's encounter with God in judgment. On the one hand, conscience is how a person experiences the coincidence of his own painful awareness of sin and the terrifying condemnation of God. This experience is available to believer and unbeliever alike. On the other hand, by faith in God's grace, conscience is how a believer experiences the justificatory declaration of God's righteousness. On this account, which many believe reflects New Testament usage (cf. C.A. Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament*), a Christian conscience, following justification by faith, is characterised by assurance of peace with God. A logical corollary is that conscience becomes secondary to faith not only in soteriology but also in moral theology. For conscience under the influence of faith does not operate primarily as a judge of particular acts but rather focuses on God's judgment on the whole person: *simul iustus et peccator*. Thus retrospective accounts have argued that conscience is a power of the soul rather than a habit of natural moral knowledge which instructs action. *Synteresis* slips out of sight to be replaced by faith as the spring of ethical life.

C Theological and psychological accounts

The second distinction pertains to conscience as theological and eschatological on the one hand and psychological and sociological on the other. Historically, this distinction can be traced through the Renaissance, Freud, Nietzsche and Barth among others. Conceptually, this distinction focuses on whether conscience can be separated from the gracious presence of God. In the aftermath of the Reformation, some Renaissance thinkers' description of conscience as a form of 'God's providential government', separable from God's gracious activity, led to its development into an unforgiving

demand for personal self-authenticity (O.O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*, pp.307). This approach is congruent with though not necessarily responsible for modern accounts of the liberty of conscience which have found favour with contemporary Roman Catholic scholars. However, the decisive conceptual break was made by Freud and Nietzsche who sought to explain conscience as a pathology which simply reflected back parental or societal norms rather than as something essentially theological. This psychological account, supported by modern sociological trends and the now largely discredited behaviourist school, has been accused of committing the genetic fallacy of mistaking mechanistic origin for total explanation. There remains too the question of whether accounts of conscience should start from the agent or from the moral field within which the agent operates, the latter lending itself more to theological interpretations.

A more radical analysis emerges from Christian eschatology and, specifically, pneumatology. Karl Barth argued that conscience is only present in Christians and is judicial not executive. He proposed that conscience is the voice of God and the voice of the eschatological 'I' prayerfully united in the Holy Spirit as a judgment from the future upon the present self. However, these eschatological judgments are largely incommunicable to others because of fallen, human epistemology and so cannot be saved up as a store of moral knowledge. This eschatological reassertion of the traditional reformation emphasis on soteriology, although involving the loss of a natural conscience, has refocused discussion of conscience today in Protestant theology. The early twentieth-century, Roman Catholic emphasis on autonomy, critiqued by Barth, has been overtaken by sophisticated accounts such as that presented in the papal encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*.

T. Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* 1a2ae q.18-19

K. Barth, *Ethics* (ET, Edinburgh, 1981)

M.G. Baylor, *Action and Person: Conscience in Late Scholasticism and the Young Luther* (Leiden, 1977)

John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (ET, London, 1993)

O. O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids, 2005)

C.A. Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament* (London, 1955)

Vatican II, *Dignitatis Humanae* in A. Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II: the conciliar and post conciliar documents* (Dublin and Clonskeagh, 1975)

J. Webster, 'Conscience' in J.Y. Lacoste (ed), *Encyclopaedia of Christian Theology* (London and New York, 2005)

J.W.S.HORDERN