

Conscience – An Essay in Moral Psychology*

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Abstract

The ultimate aim of this essay is to suggest that conscience is a very important part of human psychology and of our moral point of view, not something that can be dismissed as merely ‘a part of Christian theology’. The essay begins with discussions of what might be regarded as the two most influential functional models of conscience, *the classical Christian account of conscience* and *the Freudian account of conscience*. Then, using some insights from these models, and from some comparatively recent work in psychology and especially psychiatry, the author argues for a quite different model of conscience that might be called *the personal integrity account of conscience*.

1. Introduction

While conscience still has an undiminished role in theology, I think that one could say, reasonably accurately, that discussion of the concept of conscience in philosophy has become rather rare. The concept certainly plays little or no part in contemporary Anglo-America discussions of ethics. The only reference given in the brief entry on ‘conscience’ in Ted Honderich’s *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* is to an article commissioned for the Paul Edwards *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* published forty years ago, and the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* could only come up with an entry on ‘Medieval Theories of Conscience’. Though developmental psychology is something of a growth industry, and while it involves some interest in moral development, the concept of conscience rarely if ever plays any part in its analyses or research. If nowadays the word ‘conscience’ appears in the index of a psychology textbook in English, a very infrequent occurrence, it will be followed by a page reference to that section of the textbook that gives a cursory and rather dismissive treatment of Freud and psychoanalysis.¹

* *An earlier version of this essay was delivered as a paper at a symposium in honour of Terence Penelhum at the University of Calgary, Canada, in 2006.*

¹ See, for example, John W. Santrock’s *Adolescence* (Boston, McGraw Hill, 8th.ed. 2001) where the subject index itself ‘gives the game away’

In this essay, my overall aim is to suggest that conscience is a very real and very important part of human psychology and of our moral point of view, not something that can be dismissed as merely ‘a part of Christian theology’. I will begin on this project by extracting from the historical discussions of conscience, what might be regarded as the two most influential functional models of conscience – that is to say, models that set out what conscience is and how it operates. I call the first of these models, *the classical Christian account of conscience*. The second I call *the Freudian account of conscience*. Then, using some insights from these models, and from some comparatively recent work in psychology and especially psychiatry, I shall endeavour to construct a quite different model which might be called *the personal integrity account of conscience*.

2. The classical Christian account of conscience

It has sometimes been said that Christianity, particularly in its Protestant forms, is above all the religion of conscience. But it would be wrong to conclude from this claim that the concept of conscience began with Christianity or is limited in its religious use to Christianity. There is, for instance, something very like a proto-concept of conscience in the Old Testament. In the *Book of Samuel*, we read that, when David was aware that he had committed some moral wrong, ‘his heart smote him’, where the word translated into English as ‘heart’ is the Hebrew word *lev* [*transliterated often as ‘leb’*] which can also mean, more generally, the viscera.² And in one of the psalms (*Psalms* 16.7), we read that ‘the kidneys chastise a man’ when he does wrong. Here the Hebrew word is *kelayoth* which means literally ‘kidneys’ but can also refer to other inner organs.³ More generally, in the Old Testament, there is the suggestion that when a person does wrong, the wrongdoer, at least if morally engaged, will then suffer what might be termed ‘a backlash from

with its only entry on conscience being ‘Conscience, and superego, 403’. More usual is a textbook like Richard R. Gerrig and Philip G. Zimbardo, *Psychology and Life* (Boston, Allyn and Bacon, 16th ed. 2002) where the subject index contains no entry at all for conscience.

² *Samuel* 24:6. See also *Job* 27:6 – ‘My heart shall not reproach me’.

³ See also *Leviticus* 3:4, 10, 15, where, with *kelayoth*, the reference is to the ‘choice’ or ‘gastronomically select’ innards of an animal, and also *Job* 19:27 and *Proverbs* 23:16, where the reference is ‘more modern’ in that it is a reference to the seat of emotion.

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his or her own viscera' or, put more demotically, a sort of 'self-disgust manifested in his own innards'.

Arguably the very first mention of anything like a concept of conscience in western philosophy was by Socrates when, at his trial on charges of corrupting the youth of Athens, he is reported by Plato as defending his actions by saying:

In the past the prophetic voice [the Greek word is *daimon*] to which I have become accustomed has always been my constant companion, opposing me even in quite trivial things as I was going to take the wrong course.⁴

Then Socrates goes on to point out that, when he engaged the youth of Athens in dialectic, his *daimon* was silent, therefore he cannot have been doing any wrong. In modern terms he might have said simply, 'I cannot have been doing wrong, knowingly and willingly, because my conscience was clear', which, in essence, is the structure of any argument from the authority of conscience. It should be pointed out, however, that the Socratic conscience is significantly different from the Old Testament one, and already well on the way to becoming the classical Christian conscience. For the Socratic conscience is a *pre-factum warning* not a *post-factum visceral reaction*. In being a *warning*, it is associated with a *voice* and so with a *message*. Moreover in being a *prophetic* voice, it is invested with special *divine or divinely inspired authority*.

It will come as no surprise, then, that Augustine, the Christian Bishop of Hippo (354–430 AD), a 'Father of the Church', a confirmed Platonist, and a canonised saint, had a view of conscience that might be described as Socratic but with God's divine illumination substituted for the prophetic voice or *daimon* of Socrates. In his *Enarrationes in Psalmos* ('Commentaries on the Psalms') and *Enchiridion* ('Handbook of Faith' or 'Catechism') Augustine writes of the source of knowledge of the moral law or conscience as 'my divine illumination [*dominus illuminatio mea*]' and also as 'an interior law [*lex intima*] written in the heart itself [*in ipso tuo corde conscripta*]'.⁵

This view differs from the later view of Thomas Aquinas (c.1224–1274), in that, for Aquinas, conscience is the whole internal conscious process by which first principles of moral right and wrong, learnt intuitively by *synderesis*, are applied to some action

⁴ *The Apology*, in *The Last Days of Socrates*, trans. Tredennick, (Penguin, 2nd.ed., 1959), 74.

⁵ Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 26, 1 and 57, 1; and *Enchiridion*, 22, 81.

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now contemplated in order to produce a moral verdict on that action. Thus, while *synderesis*, as a fundamental intuitive capacity of the soul given us by God, could be said to be morally infallible, the deductive processes of conscience, whereby these first principles are syllogistically applied to some practical situation, could go wrong. Anyone, regrettably, can make mistakes in logic or errors of judgment.⁶

However, as I mentioned above, the concept of conscience in Christian theology was most developed in post-Reformation Protestant theology. Thus the 16th cent. French Reformer, John Calvin (1509–1564), wrote in his *Christianae Religionis Institutio* ('The Establishment of the Christian Religion') that

When they [humans] have a sense of the Divine justice, as an additional witness, which permits them not to conceal their sins, or to elude accusation at the tribunal of the supreme Judge, this sense is termed *conscientia*, 'conscience'. For it is a kind of medium between God and man; because it does not suffer a man to suppress what he knows within himself, but pursues him till it brings him to conviction.⁷

In some respects this account of conscience is a mixture of the Old Testament view of conscience as a sort of backlash and Augustine's view of conscience as a form of 'divine illumination' within us. Arguably it is closer to the Old Testament account in that, for Calvin, conscience is clearly a *post-factum visitation* from 'that additional witness', the Holy Spirit within us, that points out that we have sinned and hounds us until we promise to reform. Calvin's conscience is a sort of internal 'hound of heaven', and an aggressive Irish wolfhound at that, rather than a gentle Bassett hound.

It could be said that the 19th cent. English divine, John Henry Newman's account of conscience is a whole-hearted return to Augustine's *pre-factum 'divine illumination'* view. In his *Discourses Addressed to Mixed Congregations*, Newman wrote of conscience as 'that inward light, given as it is by God...[which] was intended to set up within us a standard of right and truth'.⁸ Moreover this source of moral authority was superior to reason and often opposed

⁶ Aquinas, *De Veritate*, 16.2. See also Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, (Oxford University Press, 1992), 233 ff.

⁷ John Calvin, *Christianae Religionis Institutio*, Bk.III, ch.19, sect.15.

⁸ John Henry Newman, *Discourses Addressed to Mixed Congregations*, Disc. No.5.

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to it, so it will also come as no surprise that Newman once remarked that the common room of his own Oxford College, Oriel, ‘stank of logic’.

Clearly one could not say that there is any consensus in Christian theology about how to characterise conscience. Nevertheless I think that it is both possible and useful to draw out something like a general outline of the classical Christian account of conscience. I suggest that it goes something like this:

Conscience is an inner voice of special (because divine and so morally infallible) moral illumination or expertise and of incontrovertible moral authority, which reveals itself inwardly and unavoidably in consciousness (hence the term ‘conscience’) and warns us to do good and avoid evil, and condemns us when we fail.

This definition in turn can be subjected to some analysis in the following way.

- (a) First this classical Christian concept of conscience draws upon a sub-concept of divine authority or *magisterium dei*. This *magisterium* is conceived in two ways, first, *authority meaning ‘expertise’* (in the sense, for example, that an authority on ancient Greek coins has specialist expertise or knowledge). Clearly, if the ‘light shed by conscience’ is indeed a ‘divine illumination’ or ‘the light of the Holy Spirit’, then that is all the expertise in moral matters one could ask for.
- (b) And, second, in this context authority means ‘*having the right to command and expect to be obeyed*’ (in the sense, for example, that a *police* officer has the authority to stop you speeding when you are driving along the M50). Likewise if it is God that is commanding us not to commit some sin and to reform, then no one has greater right to issue commands about such matters and expect to be obeyed without murmur than God himself, or herself.
- (c) Third, this definition makes it clear that the mechanism of conscience is *a voice that delivers warnings in a language that we can understand*. Another way of putting this is to say that it is clearly a *cognitive* account of conscience. Conscience, in that *foro interno* of consciousness, delivers a *message* about right and wrong conduct. It speaks only to creatures who have a language and have reached ‘the age of reason’, and so are capable of having a sense of right and wrong, and making judgments in accordance with that sense.

Of course any account of conscience that invokes divine authority is open to the demythologising moves of secular culture, whether these moves originate from philosophy or psychology or anywhere else. If a person does not believe in God, yet still believes in the existence of a conscience, then such a person needs to provide a very different account of the *magisterium* of conscience (in its two distinct senses) as well as of the *voice* of conscience. Unfortunately, in doing so, the best known example of such secular demythologising accounts, Freud's, seems to involve deracinating conscience and so to be ultimately unconvincing.

3. The Freudian account of conscience

Before looking at some of the details of how Freud demythologised and de-Christianised the concept of conscience, let us, briefly, look first at a pre-Freudian account that in some respects can be said to prefigure Freud.

I refer to two very provocative and rather beautiful passages in John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, published in 1690. In chapter 3 of that text he wrote:

Perhaps conscience will be urged as checking us for breaches [of morality]. . . so [that] the internal obligation and establishment of the [moral] rule be preserved. To which I answer, that I doubt not but, without being written on their hearts, many men may, by the same way that they come to the knowledge of other things, come to assent to the several [i.e. diverse] moral rules and be convinced of their obligation. Others also may come to be of the same mind, from their education, company, and customs of their country; which persuasion, however got, will serve to set conscience on [i.e. at] work, which is nothing else but our own opinion or judgment of the moral rectitude or pravity [i.e. depravity] of our own actions. And if conscience be a proof of innate principles, contraries may be innate principles; since some men with the same bent of conscience prosecute [seek out] what others avoid.⁹

Being a true empiricist, Locke is pointing out that the moral knowledge provided by our conscience, such as it is, must come to us in the same way as we gain knowledge of anything else, namely from our experience of our own environment. That being so, such moral

⁹ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ch.3, sects. 7–9.

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knowledge is ordinary secular knowledge, like our knowledge of the weather. Thus it can have no claim to be divine in origin and, more importantly, no claim to be particularly reliable, much less infallible. After all, while we might live in the same city or even in the same family, confusingly our several consciences may deliver quite different moral judgments about the same moral dilemma. This, Locke implies, is further evidence that the source of such judgments of conscience could not be divine. God would not be contradictory in His moral messages to us.

In a later section in the same chapter, he gives us his deliberately provocative gloss on this observation that humans derive the contents of their conscience not from God but from ‘their education, company, and customs of their country’:

... [These] doctrines [of conscience] that have been derived from no better original than the superstition of a nurse or the authority of an old woman, may, by length of time and consent of neighbours, grow up to the dignity of principles of religion and morality... [and] to have the reputation of unquestionable, self-evident, and innate truths.¹⁰

That is to say, what we so readily think of now as ‘unquestionable, self-evident and innate [moral] truths’ delivered by conscience, are really nothing more than the superstitions we learnt on our grandmother’s knee or in the nursery.

Let us now turn to Freud himself. In his *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1932), Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) gave a new *psychoanalytic* and *developmental* slant to this Lockean demythologising, secular account of conscience. He wrote there:

Even if conscience is something ‘within us’, yet it is not so from the first. . . . But, as is well known, young children are amoral and possess no internal prohibitions against their impulses striving for pleasure. The part which is later taken on by the super-ego is played to begin with by an external power, by parental authority. Parental influence governs the child by offering proofs of love and by threatening punishments which are signs to the child of loss of love and are bound to be feared on their own account. This realistic anxiety is the precursor of the later moral anxiety. So long as it is dominant there is no need to talk of a super-ego and of a conscience. It is only subsequently that the secondary situation develops (which we are all too ready to

¹⁰ *Ibid.* ch.3, sects.22–23.

regard as the normal one), where the external restraint is internalized and the super-ego takes the place of the parental agency and observes, directs and threatens the ego in exactly the same way as earlier the parents did with the child.¹¹

The Freudian view of conscience is Locke's empiricism with some Freudian baggage added. Just as Locke tells us that the moral contents of conscience are derived from our education, companions and cultural customs, so Freud tells us that the primary situation, and the one that really forms our conscience, is a complex childhood scenario. A newborn child, in the Freudian world, is an amoral seeker after pleasure. Suddenly the child's hedonistic *ego*-directed but *id*-driven world is thrown up against the prohibitions of its parents. 'Don't throw your cornflakes on the kitchen floor, Mary!' or 'Stop bashing the cat with your toy train, Johnny!' If Mary or Johnny don't obey these prohibitions, then they are punished, according to Freud, by the parents giving 'signs to the child of [the] loss of [their, the parents'] love'. Mummy or Daddy frown, utter condemnatory words and refuse to give Mary or Johnny an ice-cream or a cuddle. In a similar manner, obedience is rewarded by the 'offering of proofs of love', by words of praise, and by kisses and cuddles.

What we call conscience is, for Freud, the later, secondary stage whereby the child *internalizes* the parental prohibitions, together with the accompanying anxiety generated by the possibility of the loss of love if the prohibitions are disobeyed. By this process of internalizing, a child adds a third element to its topology of *id* (or the *unconscious* and irrational instincts, drives and passions) and *ego* (the *conscious* personal decision-making agency). This third element is this internalizing of the parental prohibitions and the generation thereby of a disposition to exhibit a set of accompanying emotions when these prohibitions are ignored or flouted. This third element is what Freud calls the *super-ego* (and occupies that Freudian limbo, the *pre-conscious*). The emergence and functioning of the *super-ego* is, he tells us, what we think of as *having a conscience*. Freud, of course, allows that our conscience cum super-ego can be influenced by others besides our parents, by, for example, later 'father figures' or 'authority figures'. However, for Freud, as it is for Locke, it is above all our childhood environment and experiences,

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. J. Strachey, ed. Strachey and Richards, (Penguin, 1973), 93–4. These lectures were never delivered but were a reworking of his earlier 'Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis' that were delivered at the University of Vienna in 1915–17.

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especially our parents, their prohibitions and the enforcement of them, that produces the foundational contents of conscience. For Freud describes this internalizing process as one of '*identification with the parental agency*' and 'linked with the *Oedipus complex*'.¹² Thus overstrict parents will make us forever guilt-ridden and inhibited. Indeed Freud went on to describe the super-ego or conscience as 'cruel' because it so often 'becomes over-severe, abuses the poor ego, humiliates and ill-treats it, [and] threatens it with the direst punishments. . .'.¹³ But the opposite can also occur. Absent or morally lax parents will leave us uninhibited and self-indulgent, if not downright criminal.

Like the classical Christian account, Freud has produced an authoritarian view of conscience. It is interesting to note also that, for Freud, conscience deals mainly, and perhaps only, in *prohibitions*. Like the God of the Old Testament, it threatens punishments if its prohibitions are denied. It is negative in tone, a nay-sayer, a sort of moral kill-joy, and so a source of intermittent anxiety, stress and remorse. As the comic writer Henry Mencken put it, 'conscience is a mother-in-law whose visit never ends'.

To sum up, the Freudian account of conscience is as follows:

Conscience is the development of a *super-ego* which comes about when a child internalizes the prohibitions of his parents, especially of his father, and their accompanying sanctions associated with the withdrawal of the signs of parental love. Thus the voice of conscience is an affective one, comprising the emotions of anxiety, shame, guilt and remorse.

It is no accident that the bulk of the Freudian account of conscience is generated merely by substituting the role of the parents, in particular the role of the father, for the role of God in the classical Christian account. In so doing, of course, conscience loses the transcendental moral authority that emanates from God. For now conscience has only the questionable and fallible moral authority of one's parents. Freud went even further along this substitution path by suggesting that our very belief in God is generated by our need to have a personal, parent-like creator who will protect us when we are confronted by the unknown dangers of the cosmos. He wrote:

. . .why, we may ask, should a cosmogony be a regular component of religious systems? The doctrine is, then, that the universe was

¹² Ibid. 95. Italics mine.

¹³ Ibid. 92.

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created by a being resembling a man, but magnified in every respect, in power, wisdom, and the strength of his passions – an idealized super-man... It is an interesting fact that this creator is always only a single being, even when there are believed to be many gods. It is interesting, too, that the creator is usually a man,... Our further path [to religious belief] is made easy to recognize, for this god-creator is undisguisedly called ‘father’. Psychoanalysis infers that he really is the father, with all the magnificence in which he once appeared to the small child. A religious man pictures the creation of the universe just as he pictures his own origin.

...When a human being has himself grown up...his insight into the perils of life has also grown greater...[and he knows] that faced by the world, he is still a child...He therefore harks back to the mnemonic [stored in memory] image of the father whom in his childhood he so greatly overvalued. He exalts the image into a deity and makes it into something contemporary and real. The effective strength of this mnemonic image and the persistence of his need for protection jointly sustain his belief in God.¹⁴

So it will come as no surprise that, if we now analyse this Freudian account of conscience in terms of the same three categories we employed, when discussing the classical Christian account of conscience, then a quite emasculated account of conscience inevitably emerges:

- (a) Regarding our first category, namely the authority of conscience in the sense of *conscience having moral expertise*, not merely does the Freudian account make it abundantly clear that the dictates of conscience are not of divine origin, it goes out of its way to point out that the source of its moral knowledge is quite ordinary, indeed pedestrian, namely our dear old parents. If our parents included Augustine or Bishop Butler, then we might be OK. But if they include the Boston Strangler or the Yorkshire Ripper, then we’re in trouble. The point is that, if our moral knowledge is just that of our parents or substitute-parent figures, then it is going to be as good or bad, or as reliable or unreliable, as they are or were morally speaking. In similar fashion Locke, you may recall, said that the moral knowledge inherent in our conscience was ‘no better...than the superstition

¹⁴ Ibid. 197–99.

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of a nurse or the authority of an old woman'. If that were really the case, there would be no reason to give it any special place in moral decision-making. We might just as well canvas the local butcher or bookmaker for their moral views, as recall what our parents or nursery nurse or some other 'authority figure' said.

Some years ago I remember reading about a court case in Britain in which a physician was committed for trial accused of murdering, via a euthanasia intervention, a three-day-old child rejected by the parents because of a genetic disability. The case for the defence concluded with defending QC, Mr George Carman, saying, 'Through me, Dr Arthur wishes to say...[that] he believed then, and believes now, that he acted in accordance with his conscience.' However, if we substitute the Freudian account of conscience for the word 'conscience' in that last sentence, we get 'Through me, Dr Arthur wishes to say...[that] he...acted in accordance with an internalized set of moral prohibitions, imbibed essentially from his parents'. This wouldn't, I feel, have greatly helped his case.

- (b) In our analysis of the concept of conscience, in the Freudian context, authority in the secondary sense of '*having the right to command and expect to be obeyed*', also falls upon the shoulders of the parents. Certainly for Freud, one's parents have a defining role in everything we do, hence the importance in psycho-analytic therapy of harking back to one's childhood. But there is a difference between causally pre-eminent and morally pre-eminent. Whether we like it or not, our parents (or parent-substitutes) *are* our first moral guides. But that is no reason for thinking that their prohibitions *should be* our moral guides for the rest of our lives. If nothing else, it seems to indicate a failure to grow up!
- (c) But one place where the Freudian analysis *is* very shrewd, is in connection with our third analytic category, the *voice of conscience*. The Freudian account insists that the 'voice' of conscience is not a cognitive one but an affective one. Conscience catches our attention, he tells us, not by whispering moral principles or prohibitions in our inner ear but by triggering a particular set of emotions. The voice of conscience is above all the activation of the so-called 'moral emotions' of shame, guilt and remorse. Thus a judge in a court case will often consider a longer sentence for someone who, when found guilty of some crime, does not display any of these moral emotions. But I shall return to this matter of

the connection between conscience and the emotions in some detail when discussing my next and last model of conscience.

4. The personal integrity account of conscience

Before setting out into new territory, let me briefly describe the logical geography of where we have been.

- (1) First, both the classical Christian and Freudian accounts of conscience are *externalist* accounts. Both posit an external source for the moral dictates of conscience; God in the classical account, and our parents, in particular our fathers, in the Freudian account.
- (2) Both accounts are also *authoritarian*. Both of these external sources of moral advice, God and our parents, are depicted as all-powerful moral policemen whom we dare not disobey. In each case the right of conscience to give commands in moral matters and expect to be obeyed, comes from the exalted and commanding position of the external provider of the moral knowledge, God in the Christian account, and parents, especially the father, in the Freudian account.
- (3) Both accounts also depict conscience as a *delivery system of moral advice, warning or condemnation*. Both accounts begin with an external source and then go on to describe how we are given access, through consciousness, to the moral advice or warnings or condemnations of that source.

I am going to argue that we have been exploring the wrong territory, going in the wrong direction. I am going to suggest that conscience is not a delivery system for the moral dictates of some external authoritarian source. Rather it is the development internally of a deep commitment to moral principles of an objective and 'other-regarding' sort that we ourselves have judiciously generated from many sources over many years. I will suggest that an essential part of moral development, of forming a conscience, will involve *deliberately distancing ourselves from the authority of external sources* as our moral guide, and developing *an objective moral point of view of our own* and committing ourselves to act on it. Thus I am going to put forward an *internalist* and *non-authoritarian*, though *objective*, account of conscience.

I am going to begin on this task by taking what might seem, at least at first sight, a strange path. It is well known that an important way to

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gain scientific insights into the workings of, say, the kidneys, is to study someone with complete renal failure. In similar fashion I believe that we can gain some insights into the nature of conscience by studying someone who is clinically described as ‘totally lacking a conscience’, namely a psychopath.¹⁵ I am going to begin by quoting two psychiatry textbooks of some thirty years ago, because they are so blunt, revealing and *non-politically-correct*. The first quotation is from *A Short Textbook of Psychiatry* by W.L. Linford Rees:

The characteristics of psychopathy are immaturity, self-centredness, little or no regard for the rights or convenience of others; the immediate satisfaction of desires is imperative, acting violently if frustrated, associated with a lack of conscience or sense of guilt.¹⁶

The second is from *Lecture Notes on Psychological Medicine* by T. Ferguson Rodgers and others:

[A psychopath] shows degrees of emotional disturbance so great as to prevent his successful adjustment to the demands of society...The old-fashioned terms ‘moral insanity’ or ‘moral imbecility’ pinpoint the characteristic inability of psychopaths to conform to moral standards.¹⁷

These accounts are in fact supported by the work of the best-known contemporary researcher into psychopathy, the Canadian, Robert D. Hare, who has compiled a list of psychopathic behavioural symptoms, now known and widely accepted as the *The Hare Psychopathy Checklist*.¹⁸ This checklist has been developed from an earlier one

¹⁵ In these politically-correct times, a psychopath is sometimes re-labelled as a ‘sociopath’ or, more recently, ‘someone with anti-social personality disorder’.

¹⁶ W.L. Linford Rees, *Short Textbook of Psychiatry*, (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 2nd.ed. 1976), 223.

¹⁷ T. Ferguson Rodger, et al. *Lecture Notes on Psychological Medicine*, (Edinburgh, Churchill Livingstone), 1976, 17–18.

¹⁸ R.D. Hare, *The Hare Psychopathy Checklist – Revised (PCL-R)*, (Toronto, Ontario, Multi-Health Systems, 2nd.ed. 2003). See also R.D. Hare, *Psychopathy: Theory and Research*, (New York, John Wiley & Sons, 1970); M. Gelder, D. Gath, and R. Mayou, (eds.) (*Oxford Textbook of Psychiatry*, Oxford University Press, 2nd.ed. 1991); and James Blair, Derek Mitchell, and Karina Blair, *The Psychopath: Emotion and the Brain*, (Blackwell, 2005).

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generated by Hervey Milton Cleckley who wrote the classic text on psychopathy, *The Mask of Sanity*, in 1941.¹⁹ Along with other symptoms, the Hare checklist describes the psychopath as manipulative, glibly and articulately charming, a pathological liar, arrogantly egocentric, emotionally shallow, notably lacking any empathy, remorse or guilt, lacking responsibility for his actions, impatient and impulsively aggressive, lacking in self-discipline, easily bored, and lacking in commitment to anyone or anything. Not a pretty picture!

Now what might seem to be a long list of quite disparate aspects of psychopathy can, I think, be shown to form an integrated picture of the psychopath. A psychopath is immaturely egocentric, with no empathy with other people, and without commitments to anything other than the immediate satisfaction of his own short-term self-centred desires, so it should come as no surprise that he (and it is more usually a he) will be incapable of showing any sense of personal responsibility in relation to his actions, and so any emotions of anxiety, guilt or remorse whenever he impulsively and aggressively harms others.

Contrariwise, I believe, we can begin to see how a new account of conscience emerges from this picture. Fairly obviously it seems that conscience can only arise if we develop in a way that the psychopath has failed to develop. Thus we will only develop a conscience if we succeed in overcoming the egocentricity of childhood and begin seriously to take other people into consideration when pursuing our goals. And conscience can only arise if and when we are capable of sufficient empathy with others to be distressed when our actions are harmful to them and in consequence show guilt, shame and remorse.

But let me put some detail into this alternative account of conscience by analysing it in terms of the same three categories we applied to the other two accounts of conscience, namely in terms of *authority as expertise*, *authority as the right to command and expect to be obeyed*, and finally in terms of its *voice* for advising or warning or punishing.

- (a) First, in the context of this *internalist* and *non-authoritarian* account of conscience, what if anything could provide conscience with any authority in the sense of *having moral expertise*?

¹⁹ H.M. Cleckley, *The Mask of Sanity*, St Louis, Missouri, Mosby, 1941. Cleckley also wrote, with Corbett Thigpen, a book about multiple personality disorder, *The Three Faces of Eve* (1956), which was made into a very successful film in 1957, with Joanne Woodward in the leading role.

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To provide an answer to this query, I will need to make another brief detour, this time into the area of developmental psychology. The Harvard psychologist, Lawrence Kohlberg, building on the work of the famous Swiss philosopher of education and psychologist, Piaget, developed an account of the stages of a child's moral development.²⁰ He claimed that the crucial final stages (stages 5 and 6) involved an adolescent turning away from external authority of any sort as his or her moral guide, and beginning on the task of formulating his own moral values and principles, and then finally moulding them into a consistent moral point of view. This *personal* moral point of view is the product of the process whereby a person *works out for himself or herself*, through a dialogue with himself and his parents, authority figures and peers, a set of basic moral principles and values that he is prepared to adopt and act upon. This period is, of course, what we call *adolescence*.

I am aware that there are disputes in recent developmental psychology about the precise location of such stages and even whether such a linear account in terms of stages is the right way of describing a child's normal moral development. For example, Elliot Turiel, has suggested that a child's development of basic moral principles and values, as distinct from merely acknowledging social norms, starts much earlier than Kohlberg suggests and is not in opposition to the acknowledgement of social norms, but parallel to it.²¹ Also Carol Gilligan has argued that Kohlberg's work is too male-oriented and thereby underplays the role of empathy and care in any adequate moral development.²² Leaving aside these debates, I think it is fair to say that there is general agreement with the basic claim that a child only arrives at the mature levels of moral development when he or she overcomes childhood egocentrism and seriously worries about the effects on others of one's own actions.

²⁰ Lawrence Kohlberg, 'Stage and Sequence: the cognitive-developmental approach to socialization', in D.A. Goslin (ed.) *Handbook of Socialization, Theory and Research*, (Chicago, Illinois, Rand McNally, 1969). See also L. Kohlberg, C. Levine, and A. Hewer, *Moral Stages: A current formulation and a response to critics* (Basel, Karger, 1983).

²¹ See Elliot Turiel, *The Development of Social Knowledge: Morality and Convention* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983).

²² See Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1982).

It seems also to be a basic fact of moral development that *moral expertise* (or being morally educated) emerges from this process, in much the same way as an adolescent gains *social expertise*, or the ability to mingle successfully with others in social contexts, namely by experience and thoughtful trial and error. The Lockean-Freudian account pointed out, correctly in my view, that our moral expertise is gained empirically from our environment. But it then interpreted this in a completely *passive* sense. It related how children and adolescents merely soaked up the exhortations and prohibitions of our parents or grandmother or nursery nurse or whoever. That is to say merely acknowledged familial and social norms. On my account, supported by developmental psychology, the process is essentially *active* and *dynamic*. The adolescent certainly soaks up everything, from books, films, teachers, pulpit, parents and peers *but then* as often as not questions, disagrees, disbelieves, distrusts, opposes, demands justification, rejects, corrects, adjusts to feedback, disobeys, and so on. Hence adolescence is such a turbulent, fractious phase that drives parents and schoolteachers to distraction.

- (b) Second, in the context of this *internalist* account, what could play the part of conscience's role of authority in the sense of '*having the right to command and expect to be obeyed*'? How can the *pressure* to follow one's conscience come from *within* a person? The answer, I suggest, follows from the previous account of how a conscience is generated by an essentially active and dynamic process, that for the most part operated internally in a person's own conscious life, over a considerable period of time. That active and dynamic process consisted essentially of a young person's examining, and then accepting or rejecting, candidates for being his or her objective action-guiding values and principles that override all others, and then finally of committing himself or herself to act on them 'in real life'. The pressure to act on them – the pressure for these principles to be obeyed – comes from the very personal and fundamental nature of the *commitment* to them. It has become part of their personality, part of their integrity as a person.

Commitments, like vows, promises, covenants or contracts, exert an internal psychological pressure that is similar in force to that of an external authority's command or warning or prohibition. To put it in 17th cent language, if one has made a solemn moral covenant with oneself about how to behave, when

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forming one's self as *integer* or into a 'whole and coherent person', then breaking such a covenant is a serious and disturbing matter. A matter of personal integrity.

- (c) Third, in this new account, what could be the *voice of conscience*? Again I think the answer follows from what has already been said above about this internalist anti-authoritarian model. Insofar as a person forms a reasonably stable and coherent set of moral principles that are truly 'other-regarding', and 'covenants' to act upon them, then any failure to act on them will register as a *deeply felt personal failure*. Thus both the Old Testament prophets and Freud, I suggest, were right in depicting the voice of conscience as essentially an affective one. A person of integrity's deeply and genuinely felt 'sense of personal moral failure', especially when his or her actions have adversely affected others, will show itself in the emotions of guilt, shame and remorse. The failure will be registered internally, not only in our conscious thoughts, but also as 'bodily motions' or 'motions in our innards', for emotions are complex psychosomatic episodes that involve not only our cognitive and evaluative attitudes but also our visceral reactions – our heart-beat, respiration rate, perspiration levels and gastro-intestinal motility, the very things that provide the feelings integral to the emotions. Indeed our emotions are probably the truest manifestation of our deepest values, for the reason that we cannot easily dissemble in regard to them.

Let me sum up this discussion by defining this *personal integrity account of conscience*:

A conscience is the autonomous development of a reasonably coherent set of internalized, other-regarding moral values and action-guiding principles based on them, and a commitment to act on them as overriding. These values and principles are derived, from adolescence onwards, by a personal process of critically sifting and selecting them from various external sources. Their *authority, in the sense of expertise*, is that due to the product of any serious 'trial and error' process. It is in so far as we seriously commit ourselves to acting on these principles that they gain *authority over us, in the sense of power and right to command us*. Thus if we fail in our commitment, or seriously contemplate doing so, we experience the emotions of anxiety, guilt, shame and remorse. These are the *affective voice of conscience* within us.

Sadly we are not, I fear, adapted by nature to cleave to virtue. Freud was probably more or less right in saying that we are born

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amoral. Nor are we adapted by nature, when generating our overriding action-guiding principles, to produce morally unimpeachable ones. Some of our most wicked acts have been done in the name of conscience. But we, or those of us who are not psychopaths, *are* adapted by our nature as rational creatures to have *the possibility* of forming a morally acceptable conscience. The rest is up to us and a social background of wide-ranging, never-ending, uncensored moral debate, both public and private.

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