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# Handling Issues of Conscience

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## Introduction

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With my topic, "Handling Issues of Conscience in the Academy," I have a certain puzzlement about where to begin. Of course, the modern Academy enters into many activities and allows itself to be drawn into many entanglements. You might therefore expect a discussion about issues of conscience in curriculum design, issues of conscience in faculty governance, issues of conscience in scholarly research - - or even in higher education financing, or in the relationship of the Academy with Government. Any of these might be good topics. However, I will adopt the convenient assumption that I should discuss a matter that I know something about, and so my topic will be issues of conscience that arise in university teaching.

Where in teaching might these issues be supposed to arise? Presumably in teaching those sensitive subjects where the conscientious convictions of different students, or of students and teachers, are likely to come into conflict. We all know what these sensitive subjects are supposed to be: feminism, homosexuality, multiculturalism, euthanasia, abortion - - I'm sure you can complete the list for yourselves.

I confess, though, that I have a problem with this way of thinking. To speak of a student's conscientious convictions is to suppose that he has a conscience. I believe he does, but let us take a moment to remember what conscience is, or what it was once supposed to be. In the language of the Bible, conscience is the interior witness which accuses us when we have done wrong and approves when we have done right; it is a reminder of the law written by God on every heart (Romans 2:14-15). In the language of natural law, conscience is the built-in *habitus* or inclination of the created human intellect by virtue of which we know the first principles of practical reason; it is the participation of the rational creature in the eternal law (*Summa Theologica* I-11, Q.91, art.2, Q.94, art.1). These two ways of speaking are complementary. They share the belief

in certain fundamental precepts of morality that are not only right for all, *but at some level even known to all*, conscience being the faculty by which we know them.

I assume, because you have asked me to examine of issues of conscience, that you agree with me that students have a conscience. Yet haven't we - - I mean the collective we, the Academy - - haven't we been earnestly telling students for several generations that they have no such thing? Freudians have said there is no conscience but only superego, behaviorists that there is no conscience but only inhibitions. Anthropologists have said there is no conscience but only mores, sociologists that there is no conscience but only socialization. Now at last come those Johnnie-come-latelies, the postmodernists, telling the students that there is no conscience but only narratives. *These* ways of speaking share the belief that *nothing* is known to everyone - - least of all, fixed moral principles! What superego, inhibitions, mores, socialization, and narratives have in common is that they leave us with nothing in common. The reason is that they are not written on the heart by God, not built into the created intellect, but merely pumped in from the outside by parents, teachers, policemen, propagandists, and behavioral conditioners, to serve their various private ends.

To put the matter in the simplest terms, we must choose between two tales about conscience. One is that there is such a thing, the other is that there isn't. Now I mentioned that I have a problem with speaking about issues of conscience. You may think that I have already described it by drawing attention to the question of whether conscience exists. No, that was merely to set the stage. The problem is that it is difficult to make sense of *issues* of conscience - - meaning a *clash* of conscientious convictions - - under *either* hypothesis, whether the hypothesis that conscience is real or the hypothesis that it is not.

I'm sure you see why it is hard to make sense of the clash in the latter case. If there is no conscience, then there are no conscientious convictions, and if there are no conscientious convictions, then obviously conscientious convictions cannot clash. What may look like a clash of conscientious convictions will always be a mere clash of inhibitions, or of narratives, or of conditioned reflexes or some such thing. There is nothing of moral interest here; the only question is the empirical one: who shall have power to indoctrinate. But it is almost as hard to make sense of a clash of conscientious convictions in the former case - - that is, if conscience does exist. Conscience, remember, is the interior witness to principles which are the same for all. But if they are the same for all, then how can mine clash with yours? You understand the dilemma? According to one story, there can be a clash but it is not conscientious; according to the other, there is a conscience but its convictions cannot clash.

This is a very old riddle, and it was both posed and solved, if you will believe me, in the later middle ages. We are all accustomed to distinguishing between the conscious and subconscious mind. Well, the Scholastic philosophers did not put it that way, but they made a similar distinction. They had two words for conscience, not just one, reflecting a real difference between two aspects of the mind. For conscience in the sense in which we have been speaking, they used a late Greek word, *synderesis*. Besides *synderesis*, though, there is conscience in another sense, which they called *conscientia*. Forgive me, but you must remember these definitions. *Synderesis* is the interior witness to universal basic moral law, the deep structure of moral reasoning, and it cannot err. *Conscientia* is the surface structure of moral reasoning, the working out of *applications* and *conclusions* from the universal basic moral law, and it *can* err. In fact it can err in at least four different ways: through insufficient

experience; through insufficient skill in reasoning; through inattention; or through the perversion of reasoning - - a broad category including perversion by passion, by corrupt habit, by corrupt custom, by congenitally impaired disposition, by depraved ideology, and by self-deception - - the latter corresponding to the case where we pretend to ourselves that we don't know what we really do know, either about the facts, or about the rule itself.

You see the situation. The knowledge of the universal basic moral laws which lies in *synderesis* cannot err and so does not allow for clashes. But the conclusions and applications from this law which lie in *conscientia* do err and so do allow for clashes. Even so, a clash in conscientious convictions - - convictions derived by *conscientia* - - is fundamentally different from a mere clash in inhibitions or narratives or what have you, because beneath these convictions there is something gripping, profound, and true, however it may have been twisted and falsified on its dark and winding path into present awareness. In order to take the idea of a clash of conscientious convictions seriously - - in order to believe that they pertain to conscience, but at the same time that they can clash - - I think we have to adopt some such account as this.

Let us say, then, that an “issue of conscience” is a clash of just this sort: a disagreement which arises from an error, not in *synderesis*, but in *conscientia*; a disagreement which arises because even though the universal basic moral principles are both right for all and at some level known to all, at least one of the parties has a distorted understanding of their applications and conclusions. I hope you will forgive me for having taken such a long time to work that out. The payoff, the consolation, is this: we are finally ready to consider how issues of conscience might be handled in the Academy.

Many educators believe that the right way to handle issues of conscience is to be neutral among competing convictions. I disagree, because there is no such thing as neutrality. As Joseph Boyle has observed, any ground on which conflicts between moral perspectives can be arbitrated “will in fact be *some* moral perspective and the illusion that it is neutral will have the effect of disregarding [some] moral views[.]” (Joseph Boyle, “A Catholic Perspective on Morality and the Law,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 1 (1983) 233-34) To put this another way, neutralism is merely bad-faith authoritarianism. It is a dishonest way of advancing a moral view by pretending to have no moral view.

The question of neutrality has been profoundly obscured by the mistake of confusing neutrality with objectivity. A most interesting point is that this mistake is made by both “modernists” and “postmodernists.” Modernists assume (1) that neutrality and objectivity are the same thing, (2) that objectivity is possible, and therefore (3) that neutrality is possible too. Postmodernists assume (1) that neutrality and objectivity are the same thing, (2) that neutrality is not possible, and therefore, (3) that objectivity is not possible either.

A plague on both their houses. I suggest the *premodern* view that neutrality and objectivity are *not* the same, and that objectivity is possible but neutrality is not. To be neutral, if that were possible, would be to have no presuppositions whatsoever. To be objective is to have *certain* presuppositions, along with the manners that allow us to keep faith with them. We presuppose that we exist, that our students exist, and that we exist in a really existing world. We presuppose that perception is not wholly illusion, and that the consequent relation - - “if this, then that” - - does correspond to something in reality. We presuppose that nothing can both be and not be in the same sense at the

same time. We presuppose that good is to be done and truth is to be known. We presuppose that we should never directly intend harm to anyone. And so forth. In the language of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, we presuppose the inescapable first principles of practical and theoretical reasoning and the conclusions which flow immediately from them. In the language of the Bible, we presuppose those things which the Creator has made plain even to those who reject the more particular revelations of Scripture. In saying these things are plain, of course, I do not mean that we cannot deny them. I only mean that we *can't not know* them, whether we admit that we know them or not. They cannot be proven, of course, but they do not depend on proof, because, like axioms in geometry, they are that on which the proofs themselves depend.

I said earlier that objectivity means not only having these presuppositions, but also having the manners that allow us to keep faith with them. What manners? Oh, you know the ones I mean: manners like letting the other fellow speak.

Because neutrality is impossible, I suggest a different way to handle issues of conscience in the Academy - - a way which is admittedly not neutral, but which is, I think, objective. The key is to remember the conclusion we reached before: an issue of conscience is a disagreement which arises because at least one of the parties has taken a false step somewhere along the way from *synderesis* to *conscientia*; somewhere along the way from the knowledge of universal basic moral principles that are both right for all and at some level known to all, to beliefs about their applications and conclusions. If this is true, then at bottom, handling issues of conscience means handling the problem of error and specifically, error in *conscientia*.

If the real problem is error, then we can imagine two different ways of handling it. One is attacking its symptoms, the other attacking its causes. Attacking the symptoms, of course, would mean attacking the errors themselves. Although this is sometimes appropriate in the classroom, as an exclusive methodology of teaching, it would leave something to be desired. In the first place, it would require that the teachers themselves be error-free. In the second, it would offer no assurance that corrected errors would not simply be replaced by new ones.

Attacking the causes might be more promising. We saw previously that the causes of erroneous *conscientia*, erroneous applications and conclusions from universal basic moral law, include such things as insufficient experience, insufficient skill in reasoning, inattention, and perversion of reasoning. Let's take each of these in turn.

The obvious solution to the first cause of erroneous *conscientia*, insufficient experience, is experience. It was for this reason that the ancient thinkers thought certain subjects should be delayed until the years of youth had passed - - say, until the age of thirty-five. Needless to say, we do not follow this advice, but it might be better if we did. True, the ancient philosophers wrote in an aristocratic social order in which an adult of the leisure class could afford to take up a new study, yet their insight survives transposition into our own time and place. Consider: the typical university liberal arts student of our day is unmarried, dependent on his parents, and thinks of his last birthday as a long time ago. Somehow we expect him to chatter about such matters as sexual ethics and family policy before he has begun a family, economic justice before he has paid taxes or labored for his bread, and the lessons of history before he has discovered his mortality. Such a plan is well adapted to the production of clever men and women, but hardly to the formation of wise ones.

The obvious solution to the second cause of erroneous *conscientia*, insufficient skill in reasoning, is training in practical logic. I do not mean training in abstract philosophical logic, which has become a discipline for specialists. Rather, I mean acquiring the habits of orderly thought. Here the outlook is brighter, because we can begin to teach these habits as early as puberty. The mystery is why we cannot take the trouble to do it. We expect far too much of our young people in some ways, yet far too little in others. Nineteen-year-olds on the parental dole are encouraged to speculate about Plato's proposals for the abolition of the family, yet not one in ten has been taught what an argument *ad hominem* is and why it should be avoided. Some of our colleagues even teach them to commit the common fallacies. "Whatever a man says is sexist," "whatever a white says is racist," "whatever a rational thinker says is logocentric" - - that sort of thing.

The obvious solution to the third cause of erroneous *conscientia*, inattention, is attention. The wisest ethical teachers and thinkers have not built elaborate deductive systems from flights of fancy like a presocial state of nature. Rather, they have appealed to everyday knowledge we already have but do not notice. This includes not only the knowledge of universal basic moral law, but also some matters of nearly universal experience. For instance, hedonists may say that pleasure is the greatest good, but in real life everyone discovers that mere satisfaction doesn't satisfy. Anyone who finds hedonism a plausible theory despite this fact is inattentive. He hasn't connected the dots. The good teacher helps connect them. That is why Aristotle always began his ethical inquiries by cross-examining common opinion. Now it may seem that we follow Aristotle's method, because we are always asking our students what they think. In reality that is a parody of his method. *Common* opinion means not the opinions of the moment among the young of a single generation, but the opinions widely shared or widely reputed wise throughout all generations. Despite, or because of, what is misleadingly called multiculturalism, our students know little beyond their own time and place. We could do much better.

As to the fourth cause of erroneous *conscientia*, perversion of reasoning, there is no obvious solution, because the problem lies not only in the intellect but in the desires, the emotions, and the will. This is why Aristotle, who had the luxury of choice, refused to accept students who had not been well brought-up. His reasoning was that habits of virtue must come first, otherwise the theory of the virtues will not be understood. For example, you cannot expect a young person to follow a discussion of self-control - - of when to partake of a pleasure and when to abstain - - unless, under the discipline of others, he has already been habituated to the acts that self-control requires. He may think that he knows what you are talking about, but he doesn't. He will want to argue about things that are not in doubt, like the geometry student who wants to know why parallel lines don't meet. Perhaps, he reasons, we just haven't extended them enough. If this kind of objection is indulged, then no time is left to consider the things that really are in doubt.

For another way reasoning can be perverted, remember what we said previously about conscience in the sense of *synderesis*, of knowledge of the universal basic principles of moral law. All of us have done things that are gravely wrong. If it is really true that the foundational principles of the moral law are not only right for all but at some level known to all, then the conscience of the offender is inevitably burdened. Ideally, guilty knowledge leads to repentance. In a person of weak character, however, such knowledge is more often suppressed. The offender tells himself that he doesn't know what he really does know. We tend to think that suppressed knowledge is the same as weakened

knowledge with weakened power over behavior. On the contrary, pressing down guilty knowledge doesn't make it weak any more than pressing down a wildcat makes it docile. One of the possible results is a terrible urge to rationalize the evil deed, even to recruit others to join in it. One doesn't become confused about wrong and therefore start committing it; rather he commits wrong, knows it is wrong, and therefore finds a way to confuse and reassure himself about it. My personal conviction is that half of the issues of conscience in the Academy have their origin right here.

What then can we do to ameliorate the perversion of reasoning in the Academy? I am not sure, but while we are looking for ways to make things better it would be good to avoid making them worse. One thing this means is taking the students' conscience in the sense of *conscientia* a little less seriously, but taking their conscience in the sense of *synderesis* a good deal more seriously. I remarked at the outset that for several generations we have been drumming into students that they have no *synderesis*. And do you know what? Some of them finally believe us.

Please understand me: we haven't destroyed their *synderesis*. *Synderesis* is indestructible. "As to those general principles," said Thomas Aquinas, "the natural law, in the abstract, can nowise be blotted out from men's hearts." But at the same time that they know the general principles, they convince themselves that they do not. This is the very kind of perversion of reasoning that we were considering earlier, but with this difference: it is practised not to suppress a single burning point of guilt, but as a total system of thought. The mind becomes double.

Here is what I mean by the double mind. You see, because the fellow doesn't believe in *synderesis*, he is a relativist. If he could be a relativist all the way down, his *synderesis* would be killed and he would not think in moral terms at all. He would neither make nor acknowledge moral demands. But because *synderesis* is alive and active after all, he cannot be a relativist all the way down. Consequently, his very relativism expresses itself in moral form. This is how it thinks:

- (1) there are no moral duties and no moral rights;
- (2) therefore no one has a right to make moral demands of me;
- (3) people do make moral demands of me;
- (4) these demands must be unreasonable;
- (5) unreasonable demands are unjust;
- (6) those who are making them are wrong;
- (7) they have a duty to desist;
- (8) I have a right to demand it of them.

Putting all of this together, we see that other people have all the duties, and the student has all the rights. Because they think the same way, clash is inevitable. You can get a lot of issues of conscience from a state of mind like that. And then the other cycle begins: guilt, suppression, rationalization, recruitment.

What does it mean in these circumstances to take *conscientia* less seriously and *synderesis* more so? It means mocking relativism. It means blowing the whistle on self-deception. And it means honoring

the experience of honest guilt. To illustrate these three principles I will close with three stories.

***Mocking relativism.*** One day a student approached me after class. He reminded me that I had mentioned moral law during the lecture, then said “Last semester I learned that there isn't any moral law. Every society makes up its own right and wrong, its own good and bad, its own fair and unfair - - and each one makes up something different.”

I answered, “It's a relief to hear you say that, because I'm lazy and I hate grading papers. At the end of the semester I'll be able to save myself some work by giving you an F without looking at your papers at all. Since you don't believe in moral standards like fairness that are true for everyone, I know you won't object.”

He shot me a startled glance - - then admitted that there are true moral standards after all.

***Blowing the whistle on self deception.*** “Morals are all relative anyway,” said a student to one of my colleagues. “How do we even know that murder is wrong?”

My colleague answered the student's question with another: “Are you in real doubt about the wrong of murder?”

“Many people might say it was alright,” the student replied.

“But I'm not asking other people,” pressed my colleague. “Are you at this moment in any real doubt about murder being wrong for everyone?”

There was a long silence. “No,” said the student; “no, I'm not.”

“Good,” my colleague answered. “Then we needn't waste time on morals being relative. Let's talk about something you really are in doubt about.” A moment passed while the lesson sank in - - and the student agreed.

***Honoring honest guilt.*** I often assign Aristotle's Ethics. A quiet young man came to my office one day and said, “Professor, I've got to tell you that I'm getting scared.”

I asked him, “Why are you scared?”

He replied, “Because you're scaring me. I'm shaking.”

I asked him, “How am I doing that!”

He replied, “It's Aristotle. In this book of his he keeps talking about virtue.”

I asked him, “So?”

He replied, “It's making me realize that I don't lead a virtuous life. And I'm shaking.”

So we spoke of the grace of God.

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