



TOPIC EXPLORATION PACK

PROVISIONAL

Theme: Conscience
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A Level Religious Studies

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This Topic Exploration Pack should accompany the OCR resource ‘Conscience’ activity which supports OCR A Level Religious Studies.

Introduction

The essence of this topic is a debate about an internal morality. It is the faculty or capacity of human beings to reach personal judgment or to distinguish right from wrong. It may draw on codified moral principles as well as social norms, but unlike traditional normative ethics, such as Utilitarianism and Kant, Conscience is not an explicitly designed ethic, devised by specific theorists, with rules and guidelines set down to be followed.

Instead, it is closer to agent-centered ethics, such as Virtue Ethics, as it looks at the individual's own moral code. Having said that, it is not as prescribed as agent-centered theories either.

As unique as the individual, one's conscience can be considered an internal ethic, influenced perhaps by our own experiences and our own appreciation of what is right and wrong.

By examining the various perspectives on what conscience is, it becomes easier to see how it can be a moral guide; and question the legitimacy of claims to its infallibility. If conscience is a divinely given principle of reflection, its authority would appear to be greater than if it is something developed through our interaction of society with no reference to God. As such, looking at the origins of conscience can allow us to analyse claims of the authoritative nature of conscience further.

Of course, our consciences are not always obeyed and this disobedience can be caused by a variety of different things, causing a variety of consequences.

The crux of the debate can be seen to revolve around three main areas:

1. The origins of conscience
2. The authority of conscience
3. The disobeying of conscience

Activity 1

The origins of conscience

If the childhood story is to be believed, conscience is an external voice speaking to us, in the form of an anthropomorphised bug. While we may question the necessity of it being a bug, the belief that conscience is an external voice whispering to us can be found in the works of St Augustine and Cardinal Newman.

St Augustine believed that conscience was literally the voice of God, informing us of what is right and wrong and we receive this message intuitively. Augustine asserted that all goodness comes from God and God knows our actions and the choices behind those actions directly. He maintained that hiding one's actions and being unwilling to confess them to God would lead to a distance between God and man.

Cardinal Newman stated that our nature means we have a conscience, which is a voice from God, telling us what to do. Unlike Augustine, Newman took a less literal approach, considering conscience to be a messenger from God, rather than God literally speaking to us. For Newman, conscience is a truth detector rather than a truth inventor; but like Augustine, he takes an intuitivist approach to conscience.

Where humans differ from animals is our capacity to reflect on our actions. This is the basis of **Joseph Butler's** position and this capacity is God-given. **Butler** considered conscience to be a process of intuitive judgement against conflicting desires, rather than a rational reflection. This is distinct from a direct instruction from God, as we are required to make our own judgement. Conscience does not require us to consult it as it "magisterially exerts itself" and has the final say in moral decisions. The conscience is what distinguishes us from animals and makes us distinctly human in **Butler's** thinking. This position is seen often in the media where those who ignore their consciences, such as orchestrators of genocides, are described as being less than human.

Aquinas maintained that we have an inbuilt ability to understand the difference between right and wrong, which was given to us by God, along with our natural inclination to do good and avoid evil (something he termed the 'synderesis rule'). Unlike **Augustine, Butler** and **Newman, Aquinas** did not consider conscience to be intuitive, but instead argued that conscience is a "rational power, since it is not found in brute animals" and allowed a level of human reasoning and phronesis (practical wisdom), making it a much more rationalist approach.

Freud's position on the origins of conscience is somewhat removed from those of the philosophers and theologians. For **Freud**, conscience is neither intuitive nor rationalist. Instead, it is a pre-rational function of the unconscious mind. **Freud's** contention was that human personality and behaviour are determined by three structures in the mind: the id, the ego and the superego. The id is the selfish part of the personality, which demands instant gratification. The ego is the part of the personality which responds to the id, attempting to satisfy its demands in socially acceptable ways. The conscience is found in the superego and it is a punishing force, punishing the ego with feelings of guilt, when it gives into the id's demands. Conscience is therefore, a construct of the mind, responding to an externally imposed authority by internalising the disapproval of others.

As a developmental psychologist, **Piaget** wasn't especially interested in the origins of conscience. **Piaget's** focus was a broad one, looking at how children develop their thinking from birth to approximately age 11. This is then applied to morality, although **Piaget** didn't focus on it explicitly. Piaget argued that we do not develop the ability to think abstractly, which includes thinking about morality, until around the age of eleven and so until then we must rely on others to tell us the right thing to do. Prior to the age of eleven, we have what is termed a 'heteronomous' morality, where 'right conduct' is enforced by the expectation of punishment or reward. As our ability to think abstractly develops, so we develop a more 'autonomous' morality, which draws on social norms and an appreciation of consequences, but it is autonomous because we now have the cognitive ability to think through the consequences ourselves.

Fromm

Another psychoanalyst, **Fromm** considered conscience in two different ways, changing his ideas as he changed the society he was living in. Originally, he considered the conscience to be authoritarian, derived from a fear of displeasing authority, which led to guilt, causing a greater submission to authority. This fear was, for **Fromm**, so strong that it leads people to blind, rigid thinking, not all of which is correct. He saw this as the Nazi's method of manipulating conscience during their years in power.

It is possible to see the influence of **Freud** here, with strong links to the superego and conscience as a punishing force.

Fromm's later consideration of conscience was a humanitarian one. His moving to America to escape the Third Reich probably influenced this change. In the 1950s Humanistic Psychology emerged in the United States, which asserted that all human beings have free will and the capacity

and drive for self-actualisation. **Fromm's** humanitarian conscience is closer to this position, moving away from conscience as a fear of authority figures. Instead he asserted that we all have the ability to judge and evaluate our behaviour and ourselves as people, making us our own authority figures.

Commentary

There are, then, two broad categories here as to the origins of conscience: from God or from society. Interestingly, as we will see, these are not as distinct as they may first appear to be, especially when you look at how conscience manifests itself.

Aquinas believed that conscience required the experiences and reason of the individual to make its decisions. The developmental psychologists also see an autonomous conscience as developing as we get older, gaining experience and having the cognitive ability to reason successfully.

The heteronymous conscience of the young child has parallels with Fromm's authoritarian conscience, with both of them considering reward and punishment as a motivator for behaviour. Given the deterministic nature of this position, the individual is hardly in a position to come to their own moral judgments through reason. Therefore, neither approach really allows for a conscience under the Thomist understanding.

Task 1: A discussion task

On one side of the classroom have a sign which says "conscience comes from God" and another sign on the other side of the room which says "conscience comes from society". Give the students a few minutes to decide the position they want to argue from and then ask them to stand under the relevant sign. They will then need to work with the others who share their position and justify why they are standing there. This can help begin to form a plan for an essay on the origins of conscience.

Activity 2

The authority of conscience

Conscience's authority is, to a large extent, dependent upon how conscience is defined. If, for example, it is the voice of God speaking to you, then it may have a higher level of authority than if it is an internalised societal norm.

Of course, how one defines 'authority' is also an issue. Authority can simply mean it comes from an authority figure, such as God or from a Government. It can also mean that it is something you feel obliged to obey and so where it comes from is, to some extent, almost irrelevant. There can be conflicts between external authorities and one's conscience. **St Paul** wrote that "it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience" (Romans 13:5). If conscience is God-given, as **Augustine** argued it is, then conflicts can arise when conscience is placed higher than an external authority.

Freud, for instance, saw conscience as an internalisation of the disapproval of society. While society might be considered the authority here, it is the resultant guilt when one goes against their conscience which makes us feel obliged to obey it, not society itself.

Similarly, **Fromm** considered the authoritarian conscience to have authority for no reason than because it came from an authority. This is not the same as conscience being an authority in its own right. It simply involves us fearing authority enough to submit to its demands. **Fromm** does not think this conscience should have authority over us as it can lead to wrong actions as well as good ones, depending on the authority figure's demands.

In the modern era, claiming to hear a voice from God guiding your actions could lead to a diagnosis of a psychotic disorder. The Church has never simply accepted people's claims of hearing God speaking to them without qualification. Usually the message being passed is the determinant of divine, satanic or psychotic origin. If one considers a true auditory message from God to be impossible, then the voice cannot be real, nor can its message have any authority. If this voice does come from auditory hallucinations, which are, by definition, not actually real, then one's conscience has no authority whatsoever, despite what it may feel like to the individual concerned. If, however, a true auditory message from God is possible, then the question of its authority is less easily resolved. For many believers who consider conscience to be the voice of God, they are not talking about a voice in their head, as a result of a biochemical imbalance in the brain.

Augustine, for example, ascribes this voice to God who is the witness to our actions. Similarly, **Newman** considered God to be the inventor of conscience, with conscience's role being that of a messenger, designed to detect the truth God imparts.

Butler, too, considers the authority of conscience to be divine, but he does not see us experiencing this authority as a voice, as much as a principle of reflection. In this sense he is perhaps closer to **Newman**; our conscience is a separate entity, "sacred in its authority". In his

Sermons, **Butler** preached that God placed conscience within us to be “our proper governor,” to direct and regulate all other principles and passions, arguing that “if it had power to match its obvious authority, conscience would absolutely govern the world!”

For **Aquinas**, conscience is a natural phenomenon, which is given by God. It is not, however, as infallible as **Butler** might have claimed, for **Aquinas** saw it as needing our reason and the application of practical wisdom. The authority of conscience is from God, who gave us the ability to use reason and the natural inclination to do good and avoid evil. We sometimes make mistakes because we misapply our reason, following apparent goods instead of real goods.

Conscience is something we need to engage with and **Aquinas** appreciated that different societies will have different perspectives on what ‘right behaviour’ was because their experiences were different. He believed that people should always follow their consciences, but that didn’t mean that one’s conscience was always correct. This rationalistic approach to conscience leaves open the possibility of error, making it a more realistic view of how conscience works.

From the perspective of the psychologists, the social construction of conscience creates a form of authority which is hard to reject without violating social norms, which are so firmly internalised within our psyches. Considering conscience to have an authority at all could be considered difficult because much of its construction is an unconscious process according to **Freud**. For **Piaget**, prior to the formation of conscience, our ‘conscience’ is others’ conscience and it is this which imposes the authority. As we develop our capacity for abstract thought and our conscience develops, the authority becomes more obvious, although the social norms which help inform our consciences remain authoritative. For **Fromm**, the authoritarian conscience’s authority comes from fear; especially the fear of displeasing authority, while the later humanistic conscience’s authority comes from within us and our own evaluation of our behaviour.

Commentary

The origins of conscience seem to have a direct bearing on its authoritative nature. While Piaget did not focus on the authoritative nature of conscience, the psychoanalysts, **Freud** and **Fromm**, consider conscience to have a societal authority. The internalisation of an external authority leads us to obey our consciences as ignoring its authority could have immediate negative consequences, namely punishment and guilt. The desire to avoid these unpleasant feelings is what gives conscience its authority in the first place. **Butler** has a similar position, but he considers it to be God and not society as the author of this internalised morality. He, therefore, imposes a higher authority on conscience, although this is not to say it is any more, or less, potent.

Activity 3

The disobeying of conscience

Disobeying one's conscience usually leads to unpleasant feelings. Guilt is probably the most common feeling an individual feels when they disobey their conscience. Where this guilt comes from may differ, but there are some startling similarities to be found between the theologians and the psychologists.

If social norms dictate that homosexuality, for example, is wrong and our conscience is developed by the internalisation of social norms, then our conscience might well say that homosexuality is wrong. If, however, this is questioned, we may opt to change our position on the issue, which would lead to us disobeying our conscience. Of course, our conscience would change as our thinking changes, but in the initial stages, disobedience would be inevitable. The same could be said about social norms in a more secular setting, such as those in America in light of the Civil Rights movement. Here, social norms were challenged and as such, people's consciences were changed to consider black people as having equal rights to white people, where this had previously not been so.

Conversely, people could prioritise Scripture over their conscience. So, using the homosexuality example, our conscience may consider homosexuality to be morally acceptable, however, as Scripture takes the opposite view, we would defer to Scriptural authority; thus disobeying our conscience.

If it is considered that human beings are given free will, then we have a freedom to choose to disobey our conscience or at least not to follow it blindly. **Aquinas** argued that we must use our reason and practical wisdom when we make moral decisions. He did not consider that following our conscience meant that we were always right. If our reasoning was wrong, then our moral judgement would therefore also be wrong. There are parallels here to the thinking of the developmental psychologists, who consider our reasoning to develop as we grow up. Following our conscience, for **Aquinas**, means that we apply our moral principles to the situation as best we can using a combination of reason and phronesis: a task which probably gets easier as we get older.

Butler, by contrast, considered the deliberate disobeying of conscience to be worse than the action which you disobeyed conscience in order to do, as disobeying conscience is a deliberate deviation from man's true nature. As conscience is from God, disobeying it is akin to disobeying God, which in **Butler's** thinking, is a wicked sin.

Newman's contention was that because we feel ashamed and are frightened when we go against what our conscience tells us, there must be One we feel responsible to and whom we fear. **Fromm** takes a similar position in his authoritarian personality when he describes the authority figure which we are fearful of displeasing. He does not, however, ascribe this One to God specifically, as Newman does, although it is clear that the authority could be applied to God.

The Superego is probably the clearest place to see guilt as a result of disobeying conscience. For **Freud**, the conscience, found in the superego, punishes the ego when it gives into the id's demands and this punishment is the feeling of guilt. If the superego becomes too dominant, it can lead to neuroses, which can make us feel guilty. This shame and fright comes as a result of the internalisation of the externally imposed authority of society, rather than from God, although **Freud** considered religion to be a sufficient authority.

For the developmental psychologists, it is not so much the disobeying of conscience as such; it's more whether we have actually acquired one yet. **Piaget** considers young children to have a heteronomous morality, where what they consider correct behaviour is focused around reward and punishment from an authority figure, often their parents. At this point, there are probably unintentional parallels with **Fromm's** authoritarian conscience. As children grow older, their thinking becomes more sophisticated and they begin to be able to think and reason things out for themselves. They are able to think about their actions as autonomous beings. For **Piaget**, this starts to develop around the age of eleven, although other developmental psychologists believe it starts slightly later.

Conclusion

The origins and authority of conscience are intertwined, with the origins having a large impact on the perceived authority of conscience. The outcomes and implications of disobeying one's conscience are also linked to this as if the authority of conscience is divine, then a divine punishment may be considered more severe than a societal one.

Conscience may be the voice of reason, the voice of God, or the mouthpiece of society, but it seems to have a powerful influence on the individual. As we feel guilty when we transgress our conscience, we can see the authority it imposes. Where this authority comes from is hotly contested, but the authority of conscience is recognised by philosophers, theologians and psychologists alike.

It may appear that there are fundamental differences in the thinking of the various scholars, but look carefully and you will see parallels. They differ, certainly, in their definitions of conscience and perhaps its origins, but when it comes to what happens when one goes against conscience, they all seem to agree that it is not a good state to be in. These similarities and differences will provide ample scope for analysis and evaluation in an essay.

Task 2: A summary task

As a way to summarise this entire topic onto one sheet of paper, students can make a chart. Across the top are three columns: origins, authority, disobedience. Down the side are the names of the scholars. Students can fill in the boxes as a pair in class. This could be done at the end of each section of the topic or at the end to consolidate their knowledge and understanding.

	Origins	Authority	Disobedience
Augustine			
Newman			
Butler			
Aquinas			
Freud			
Piaget			
Fromm			

	Origins	Authority	Disobedience
Augustine	Conscience is God whispering	Divine	Disobeying God. sinful
Newman	God Conscience as detector of truth	Divine	We fear displeasing god
Butler	God Intuition Exerts itself without consultation	Divine Infallible	Deception of conscience worse than resultant action
Aquinas	God and human reason	Divine, but we need to use our reason & experience	Result of poor reason
Freud	Internalisation of external (societal) authority by superego	Society (and the avoidance of guilt)	Guilt and neurosis can result if conscience disobeyed
Piaget	Develops as we get older Autonomous morality = age 11+	Heteronomous: an adult authority figure Autonomous: we are our own authority	Heteronomous: fear of punishment from authority figure Autonomous: feeling of guilt
Fromm	Authoritarian: comes from fear of displeasing authority Humanitarian: our real self, aiming for self-actualisation	Authoritarian: an external authority figure (although shouldn't have authority) Humanitarian: we are our own authority	Authoritarian: fear of punishment from external authority Humanitarian: we fail to reach self-actualisation

Task 3: A revision task

Each student needs to produce a PowerPoint, with one slide per scholar. Students can design this as they see fit, but one suggestion would be to have four different coloured boxes. Each box contains a title: definition, authority, origin and disobedience. Keeping the colours consistent throughout the PowerPoint, students can either keep it as “by scholar” or they can put all the “definitions” of conscience on one slide, then all the “origins” on another slide and so on. A useful revision tool, this could also be used as a matching exercise in class. One of the perks of using a PowerPoint is that students can print the slides out and put them on their walls, or they can save it onto their phones and revise whilst waiting for the bus!



Sample PowerPoint slide



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