

Nietzsche's Insight: Conscience as Amoral

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“Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, “This is the way; walk in it.” (Isaiah 30:21) The Bible, Aristotle, Aquinas, Rousseau, and many others in the history of both Western religion and philosophy have described the phenomenon of being guided by a voice. We generally call this “conscience.” Sometimes conscience is interpreted as the word of God, sometimes as the voice of human reason, but it is almost always a voice telling one what one should do. Conscience has had a close association with morality, or the “right” or “appropriate” way of doing things, and we often call it a “failure of conscience” when an individual commits an atrocious act.

This paper will argue that conscience is not primarily a moral guide, but instead a capacity that is responsible for new ways of thinking and living. One way this manifests is in regards to our moral beliefs, but this is only one form of a more fundamental phenomenon. I will ultimately conclude that conscience’s role and importance goes beyond merely the realm of morality and right action.

This analysis will primarily draw from the works of Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche offers a detailed examination of conscience, though he is certainly not the first thinker in the Western tradition to do so. This paper will not attempt to give a history of the concept, however. I am examining Nietzsche in particular because he attempts to save conscience from its moral trappings and emphasize a more fundamental function to conscience. For Nietzsche, conscience is the awareness of our promise to adhere to certain values. The first section of this paper will focus on Nietzsche and the second on the philosophical implications of his ideas.

Nietzsche on Values and Conscience

Human values are a central focus of Nietzsche’s thought. What we deem good and bad, the decisions we make, and how we live our lives are all based on the values we hold. But how are we to evaluate the value of values? Nietzsche’s answer is that values are always the expression of a kind of life, and each kind of life forms values based on one’s relationship to the world. Values are thus always evaluated in terms of whether they inhibit or enhance a particular kind of life. According to Nietzsche, we always posit values; he even points out that we would rather invest in values that devalue ourselves and our ways of life (through negation, nothingness, nihilism) than defer willing any value at all. (*GM* III, 1) Regardless of what particular values we hold, however, what reminds us of what we value is our conscience. For Nietzsche, conscience does not merely tell us what is right or what is wrong; conscience fulfills a much more fundamental, much more important role: conscience is our awareness of responsibility.

Conscience, Bad Conscience, and Responsibility

Nietzsche’s most in-depth analysis of conscience occurs in *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Despite the title, however, there is only a tenuous connection between conscience and morality. It is important to note the ways in which Nietzsche uses the term “conscience” in this work. How Nietzsche discusses conscience—the way and context in which he does so varies from section to section—bears on his message.

This is because there are actually several versions of conscience for Nietzsche. In the text, he refers to them as “conscience” and “bad conscience,” but for clarity, I will use “good conscience” and “bad conscience” to refer to each type specifically. Nietzsche’s analysis of conscience in *Genealogy* starts with good conscience since it represents the positive form of conscience; it posits values meant to express life as fully as possible. Later, Nietzsche will describe bad conscience as a kind of corrupted good conscience, where what once was an ability meant to express human powers becomes a way of containing and repressing certain kinds of human drives.

Nietzsche describes good conscience as a capacity that has arisen out of the development of humankind. It is a late development, but nevertheless an important one. He notes: “The proud knowledge of the extraordinary privilege of *responsibility*, the consciousness of this rare freedom and power over himself and his destiny, has penetrated him to his lowest depths and become an instinct, his dominant instinct...this sovereign human being calls it his *conscience*.” (*GM II*, 2) Good conscience is not merely an ability—it is an instinct and a privilege.

To instill this awareness of responsibility requires overcoming a tremendous force: forgetfulness. To be responsible requires promising to adhere to a certain vow, commitment, etc., but to be able to fulfill such a promise requires, first and foremost, remembering that a promise has been made. Forgetfulness is in direct opposition to such a commitment. As Nietzsche points out, “Forgetfulness is not just a *vis inertiae*...but is rather an active ability to suppress.” (*GM II*, §1) We generally think of forgetfulness as failing to grasp something in such a way that it “sticks,” but here forgetfulness is something active, not merely a failure to remember. Nietzsche points to everyday experience to justify his claim; in everyday experience, we

forget quite a lot—sensations, feelings, experiences, etc. As Nietzsche puts it, forgetfulness “[Shuts] the doors and windows of consciousness for a while,” (*GM II*, §1) giving us a respite, a chance to step back and take a breath. As we go about our day, much of what we sense never enters our consciousness; we are often unaware we sensed anything at all. This is why Nietzsche characterizes forgetfulness as something active: it actively suppresses the background noise of everyday experience, and without it, we would be overwhelmed with the totality of sensations given by experience. Thus, it is necessary to make that which needs to be remembered have sufficient weight to counter the power of forgetfulness.

To do this requires a way of producing an experience that is not easily forgotten, and Nietzsche claims this was done with experiences of pain. “When man decided he had to make a memory for himself, it never happened without blood, torments and sacrifices.” (*GM II*, 3) Pain is used as a means of making man into an individual that will remember his promises. Of course, it is not simply abstract pain or punishment that forms a man's memory: it is associating pain with the failure to adhere to a promise. When man promises, implicit (or explicit) in the agreement is the threat of harm should the promise be broken—otherwise the promise means nothing. By putting something of man's own at stake in the promise, it becomes highly important to him, important enough to be remembered. It is out of this threat that the awareness (or perhaps, more accurately, the remembrance) of responsibility arises.

This description may raise an objection, however. Namely, if a promise is always made between two individuals, and if individual A is to be punished for forgetting his promise, then individual B must remember the promise so that individual A can be appropriately punished. In other words, there must always

already be one individual who already is capable of remembering the promise in every promise; the account of the origin of this memory of responsibility thus presupposes what it is trying to explain. There are two ways to respond to this criticism. First, the key elements here are man remembering some action and being able to associate some experience of pain with that action as its effect. For example, someone may choose to not gather food, starve later, and then see their current starvation as a result of their earlier decision. In this way memory can be reinforced without another individual. We could also say that an individual can make promises to himself. To use the same example, one could promise to gather food to oneself, break that promise, and then see the starvation that results as the effect of breaking that promise. Again, no other individual is needed here.

Out of this painful process, promises gain sufficient weight to counter forgetfulness. This proves to be the inception of Nietzsche's first version of conscience, good conscience. Good conscience is held by what Nietzsche refers to as "the sovereign individual." He states: "Society and its morality of custom finally reveal what they were simply *the means to*: we then find the *sovereign individual* as the ripest fruit on its tree, like only to itself, having freed itself from the morality of custom." (*GM II*, 2) Given that this essay is asserting conscience is *not* primarily a moral phenomenon, caution is needed here. What exactly does Nietzsche mean by "morality" and "custom"? In *Daybreak*, Nietzsche defines morality as: "Nothing other than obedience to customs, of whatever kind they may be; customs...are the *traditional* way of behaving and evaluating." (*D I*, 9) Morality is not anything like a commandment from God, activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, or an imperative based on human reason. To say the sovereign individual has freed himself from the morality

of custom means only that the individual has been freed from obedience to tradition. But if society's "morality of custom" is meant to make man adhere to tradition, it seems odd that what we get is not a truly predictable, responsible man, but instead one who defies his responsibilities to the tradition and history that created him. In fact, the sovereign individual is responsible, and is predictable—not to his history or culture, but to himself. The sovereign individual has his own values, and his predictability and responsibility manifest in his ability to adhere to the rules which he sets down for himself. The awareness of this responsibility to one's own values constitutes good conscience.

A similar process occurs for the other version of conscience, bad conscience. Like good conscience, bad conscience starts as a response to tradition. Unlike good conscience, however, bad conscience does not break free of tradition and posit its own values. Instead, with bad conscience man's instincts are repressed and turned against him. For Nietzsche, bad conscience first appeared when man "finally found himself imprisoned within the confines of society and peace." (*GM II*, 16) For Nietzsche, we are fundamentally guided and motivated by innate desires and drives. Our drives take a variety of forms and vary from individual to individual, but our basic way of existing is one of expressing ourselves and our power.

One can very easily imagine this being the case for an individual living on an island; the only limits on his behavior, what he is willing to do and what he is not, are those he himself sets—no one else is there to tell him "No." But society does not work like this; we have standards, rules, norms, and laws. The awareness of the promise to adhere to these aspects of society, a power that had to be reinforced in man, may be a problem if it clashes with one's fundamental drives.

If we feel driven to do something that is forbidden by our culture, our desire threatens our ability to keep our promise to our culture to stay within its boundaries. When one makes a promise to another individual, there is room for outside expression—what one does outside the terms of the agreement is one's own business. When one makes a promise to culture, there is no “outside the agreement.” Acting in a way deemed illegal by that culture is illegal regardless of where the crime is committed. As a result, the drives man would normally have that go against the terms of the agreement are bottled up and repressed. This is a problem, because for Nietzsche, instincts do not simply dissipate when they find themselves repressed or denied: “All instincts which are not discharged outwardly turn inward.” (*GM II*, §16) The forbidden instincts have to find some route by which they can express themselves, and if that route cannot be outer, then it has to be inner. The destructive tendencies of man, “Animosity, cruelty, the pleasure of pursuing, raiding, changing and destroying—all this was pitted against the person who had such instincts.” (*GM II*, §16).

This is, essentially, man fighting against himself. On the one hand, he has some drive to express himself, to live his life to the fullest extent he can. But on the other, by existing in a culture with others, he has made a promise to adhere to certain rules. This is the origin of bad conscience: man pitted against himself. Nietzsche still uses the word ‘conscience’ because bad conscience is structurally the same as good conscience: there is still a promise and still the association of pain with the breaking of the promise. But this version of conscience has been corrupted; what once was a power that allowed one to express the power of promising has become a way to control and constrain man.

It should be stressed that though man is the inventor of bad conscience, it is only because of others that one’s conscience is “bad.” Man

wants to break his promise because he has some drive that is repressed, but his awareness of his responsibility to keep that promise makes him feel guilty. Or, if he does break his promise to culture and does what he wants, he still feels guilty, since his bad conscience reminds him of his transgression. Bad conscience is a constant reminder of the promises one has made to one’s culture and the fact that one wants to break (or has broken) that promise. “Everything that hurt the herd, whether the individual had willed it or not, gave the individual pangs of conscience.” (*GS III*, 117) Bad conscience is the voice or presence of culture (“the herd”) in the individual and repressing the drives of that individual.

To trace the development of both good conscience and bad conscience from their origins, then, we first have individuals who exist in some basic relationships to each other, but who lack the memory to keep promises, so any kind of structured society based on laws or traditions is impossible. But then we find a few individuals who perhaps were unfortunate enough to suffer due a bad memory, but fortunate enough to survive. These individuals have a better memory than others, and realize that they are capable of both making and keeping promises. From here, we gain the first version of conscience, which posits its own values and keeps them firmly in mind. However, we also gain the second version of conscience, bad conscience, which lacks the strength to posit its own values and so has to repress certain aspects of itself in order to survive.

Development, Evolution, and the Role of Conscience

Giving an account of conscience’s role in Nietzsche’s thought is not an easy task. The prior section indicated that conscience is not merely one phenomenon for Nietzsche, it has two forms: good conscience and bad

conscience. The question then is: does conscience have the same purpose in both its forms or does its purpose differ in each version? This section will argue for the former position; conscience in either case posits values that set new limits on what we can and should do. However, more concretely, good conscience posits values primarily aimed at the fullest expression of life, while bad conscience posits values to inhibit or repress those ways of life it despises.

The previous section referred to “society,” “culture,” and “tradition,” but did so in somewhat loose, vague terms. After all, the individuals with good conscience or bad conscience are themselves part of society, not somehow separate from it. To make matters simpler, let us assume that society is divided into two massive camps, those with good conscience on one side and those with bad conscience on the other. We are, of course, aware that such a division is far too simple and fails to see nuances, but for the purposes of an initial explanation, it will help make matters clearer.

Since good conscience is concerned with the positing of new values and adhering to those, the good conscience camp will naturally posit its own values, while the bad conscience camp, which is essentially reactive, lacks the strength to posit its own values and so merely takes on the values posited by the good conscience camp. But, of course, the interests, strengths, and desires of those in the bad conscience camp will not be completely in sync with those of the good conscience camp. Unfortunately for those in the bad conscience camp, this means the unacceptable drives must be repressed, and this is precisely what constitutes their bad conscience. To cope with their situation, we would naturally assume those in the bad conscience camp might have a variety of responses: resignation, rebellion, trying to rise to the level of the “strong,” perhaps even taking on the mentality of “I

deserve this punishment.” These may all be true, but Nietzsche emphasizes one mode of response in particular: subversion. With subversion, the bad conscience camp rejects the values handed down by the good conscience camp, and instead inverts their values: what was previously good becomes bad, and what was once a sign of strength is now considered weakness.

With this shift in the moral axis, those with good conscience are now at a disadvantage; what previously was their greatest strength is now considered their weakness. One might object that a revaluation of values does not mean the structure of power has changed; those with bad conscience may still be oppressed. This is true, and to respond to this criticism we must add a bit of depth to our model. Since those with good conscience are concerned with positing their own individual values, some of these values may line up with those of other individuals, but given the uniqueness of each individual, there is significant room for conflict and contradiction. As such, the good conscience camp is not quite as homogenous as we first imagined; it is in fact rather fragmented. Further, what reason do those with good conscience have to take those with bad conscience seriously? After all, these are individuals who are too weak to posit their own values. This, combined with the fact that those of the good conscience camp are more concerned with living in accordance with their own values than what others may think, leads to an underestimation of the resentment building in the bad conscience camp.

This set of circumstances sets the stage for a massive upheaval of values. The members of the bad conscience camp now have their own values, their own traditions—and they are antithetical to those previously posited. As these values supplant the old ones, a new culture is established. Now those who previously had a good conscience find their ability to live as they wish repressed. In other

words, they gain a bad conscience. Does this mean that a complete reversal has occurred? Well, no. Good conscience is concerned with positing values for the fullest expression of life, but the values posited by the bad conscience camp are primarily concerned with repressing another group's set of values; they are essentially reactive.

But we take as solace that out of this process there is still a possibility for the positing of new values, rather than the habitual overturning of values. This is why Nietzsche says: "The strongest and most evil spirits have so far done the most to advance humanity: time and time again they rekindled the dozing passions." (GS I, 4) Evil, for Nietzsche, does not mean an individual who is cruel, sadistic, or manipulative, but instead an individual who posits new values that overthrow the old system of values. It must be stressed that this is done not to repress the old values and those who held them, but primarily as an act of creation; the act is done in accordance with one's good conscience. These are the kind of individuals who offer something truly new, who are concerned with the affirmation of life rather than its negation and repression. Unfortunately, as we have seen, even when new values are created without intending to harm, they will nevertheless repress some other individual's ability to live fully, and so sow the seeds of bad conscience once again.

Out of this whole process, we see two tendencies in man. First, we see the tendency towards obsessive, vengeful stagnation. Values are fundamentally the same, but they can be pieced together differently. If one envisions two enemies trying to piece together a puzzle (we could perhaps call this puzzle "morality"), their fight over the pieces may break apart the puzzle again and again, and who knows how long it will take them to finish. In their back-and-forth struggle, they may not notice they are missing a piece of the puzzle. This option is bleak, for it means our

future is just a constant struggle until we reach a state of complacency ("We have done the best we can with what we have"). If it prevails, we become what Nietzsche calls "the last man," a breed of individual who has given up on the possibility of there ever being anything better, and therefore the current state of things is the best possible way of being. On the other hand, we could have the manifestation of "the *free spirit* par excellence." (GS IV, 348) Since bad conscience arises out of repressing some way of living, if we are strong enough and flexible to adapt and change as needed, bad conscience need never come into the world at all. Conscience, in general, is thus a power that carries with it both the possibility of halting human life and progression, and simultaneously a power that can elevate us to new ways of thinking, acting, and living.

Philosophical Implications

What does this mean for us, in terms of how we think about conscience and how we think about the world? To summarize the previous sections, Nietzsche describes conscience as awareness of one's ability to promise, either to oneself or to others, which is most important in regards to the promises made to culture. Ultimately, because of conscience, we are able to posit values that determine what is acceptable and good, and what is forbidden and bad.

What Nietzsche emphasizes is the role of culture in determining how we live. Culture sets the values according to which we either must adhere or suffer the consequences if we decide to break free. What is the norm, what is expected of us, may clash with the way of living that is best for us, or even what would be a better way of living for society as a whole. As such, we need a way to reevaluate and overturn what society has prescribed as the way we should do things.

This is the role, purpose, and function of conscience. Conscience enables us to posit

new values, new ways of thinking and living. Conscience is how we are able to grow, evolve, and change as a species. Unfortunately, conscience is essentially a kind of rebellion. Good conscience posits its own values, regardless of what values one's culture holds, and in doing so rebels against established values. This means that what conscience posits may face opposition from the mainstream way of doing things. We can see this in the growth of new views and ideas in select disciplines, the creation of new disciplines, the evolution of politics and political views, and the advancement of rights for human beings either in select minorities or for humanity as a whole.

Ultimately, we cannot really say that one should "always listen to your conscience," or "let your conscience be your guide." Since conscience does not posit linear, progressive

improvement, it is not necessarily always better either for us or for others than what is already in place. However, we cannot say for certain in advance what the results of positing a new way of thinking or set of values will be.

What is certain is that conscience fills a role far more important than that of mere moral guide. The evaluation of morals, rethinking what is right and wrong, is certainly a significant aspect to human behavior, and the conclusions we draw have a significant impact on how we think about the world and decide what is important. But this is merely one of the ways conscience makes itself known; its influence extends far beyond the realm of mere morality. Conscience is what makes possible the development of human ideas, human actions, and human ways of life.

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