

# Moral Conscience and the Experience of God

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I am making a systematic theological point about the relationship between moral conscience and the experience of God. While the same theme may be taken up as a moral theological question, my intention is to explicate in part the meaning of 'God' as implied by the Christian witness of faith, and so I am approaching the theme as a systematic theologian and not from the perspective of moral theology. That is, I intend to ask primarily about the significance of moral conscience for understanding our experience of God, and not vice versa.

Clearly the phrase 'the experience of God' is systematically ambiguous, and I will argue that the term 'moral conscience' or 'dictates of conscience' is also systematically ambiguous, and that recognition of this ambiguity helps us resolve a cluster of philosophical and theological problems that accompany any assertion that moral conscience is a mode of the experience of God. ('The experience of God' is also grammatically an ambiguous phrase, of course. Here I will be using it as an objective genitive unless otherwise indicated.)

My central hypothesis is that the experience of moral conscience is a primary mode of the experience of God, if not the most important mode. This hypothesis is hardly without controversy: at least since the beginning of the nineteenth century, when D.F. Schleiermacher argued against any simple identification of moral conscience and religious experience, it has been recognized to be complex and problematic. Schleiermacher wrote in 1799 that religion 'must be something different from a mixture of opinions about God and the world, and of precepts for one life or for two. Piety cannot be an instinct craving for a mess of metaphysical and ethical crumbs' (Schleiermacher, 31). His point was just that piety or religion is not reducible either to propositional belief or to morality, as some eighteenth century apologists had been apt to describe it. Rather, it is an 'indispensable third', which is logically and existentially prior to propositional belief and morality. Religion involves, he thought, a 'sense and taste for the infinite' (39), and his development of this idea under the category of 'the feeling of absolute dependence' in

his more technical theological writings signals a revolution in theological method. The methodological 'turn to the subject' characteristic of modern theology since Schleiermacher renders my hypothesis problematic.

### *Vatican II on God and conscience*

In paragraph 16 of *Gaudium et Spes* Vatican II said:

Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, tells him inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. His dignity lies in observing this law, and by it he will be judged. His conscience is man's most secret core, and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths. By conscience, in a wonderful way, that law is made known which is fulfilled in the love of God and of one's neighbour. Through loyalty to conscience Christians are joined to other men in the search for truth and for the right solution to so many moral problems which arise both in the light of individuals and from social relationships. Hence, the more a correct conscience prevails, the more do persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and try to be guided by the objective standards of moral conduct. Yet it often happens that conscience goes astray through ignorance which it is unable to avoid, without thereby losing its dignity. This cannot be said of the man who takes little trouble to find out what is true and good, or when conscience is by degrees almost blinded through the habit of committing sin (Flannery, 916—7).

I restrict myself to five brief observations.

First, within human conscience is discoverable a voice which summons us to love and to do what is good, and which thereby communicates to us 'a law inscribed by God'. In the depths of human experience, then, we have access to a communication from God, by which we may discover that law by which we are judged.

Second, the gift of the communication of the moral 'law' is accompanied with, and is inseparable from, an imperative. The law is *fulfilled* by love for God and love for neighbour. Furthermore, because the gift of the law culminates in the demand to love God and to love one's neighbour, it is also that which judges us. The possibility of such judgment is the foundation of human dignity.

Third, obedience to conscience is the means by which human community is formed. Thus, the law inscribed in our hearts leads us into communion with our neighbours. This law, in fact, constitutes the other as 'the neighbour' we are required to love.

Fourth, despite the givenness of the law in the depths of human existence, conscience (a) may remain undeveloped or undiscovered, so that one may remain ignorant of it, that is, it may never undergo transition from a subjective fact given in the conditions of human existence itself to an objective, articulated standard of conduct; or (b) it may be incorrectly objectified; or (c) it may be rendered dysfunctional through habitual violation.

Fifth, the 'law' is accessible to everyone because of being inscribed in our hearts, so that whoever seeks to discover what is true and good thereby accesses the communication given to us by God. Although this law is present in 'the most secret core' of a human being, it is nevertheless an 'open secret' (cf. Oman, 228).

The voice of conscience is therefore not merely a private and subjective phenomenon, but also has a public character because it is given to all human beings. We must, accordingly, acknowledge our neighbour not only as one whom we must love, but also as having the same law as is given to ourselves. Thus, our neighbour is also a bearer of the same dignity given to us with the possibility of doing the good, and, likewise, we must recognize our neighbour's dignity to be grounded in the same source in which our own dignity is grounded. This recognition draws us into communion with our neighbour. It follows that to deny our neighbour's dignity to deny our own since the neighbour's dignity can be denied only by denying the source of that dignity, which is the source of our own.

The second highly relevant Conciliar text is from paragraph 16 of *Lumen Gentium*. Speaking of the ways in which those who have not received the Gospel are related to those who have, it says

Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation. Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life (Flannery, 367—8).

I will make three observations about this passage by way of comparison with the former text.

First, while the former text implies that no one is without the law 'inscribed by God' in our innermost conscience, the second claims that no one is 'without grace'. We may infer that the 'dictates of conscience', which are a manifestation of the law given to us all, is a form of grace. The second passage asserts that even to seek God, and consequently to seek to do 'his will', is the result of being moved *by grace*—what Catholic theology traditionally calls *gratia operans*, i.e. 'operating grace' (cf. Aquinas, 1a 2ae. 111, 2). The law inscribed in our hearts, then, is nothing

other than grace itself; it is God's initiating activity which is presupposed by every experience of moral conscience. Further, even striving to lead a good life in accordance with the inner voice of one's conscience is said to result *from grace—gratia cooperans*.

Moving to my second comparative observation on the two texts: the former asserts that the law inscribed by God in our hearts is that by which we are judged, the latter asserts that this same law, as grace, is that by which we achieve eternal salvation. The achievement itself, however, is the effect of grace as operating and co-operating. The achievement, therefore, is not our own, but is God's achievement. *What bears our judgment also bears our salvation*. But because it is God who judges and saves, we may infer that the communication of the law within our conscience is *no mere communication of moral principles* or 'objective standards of conduct' somehow embedded in the structure of our existence. Our conscience bears within it not merely a communication from God, but the self-communication of God. The law in our hearts is nothing other than the self-communicating presence of God to us in every moment of our existence. Thus, moral conscience is a mode of the experience of God's self-communicating presence to us.

A third observation follows from the second. The experience of God must be an ever-present and unavoidable aspect of human experience in order for human beings never to be without foundation of dignity and without the possibility of moral experience. Thus, to be human at all is to be a moral creature, a creature endowed with the 'dictates of conscience'. It follows, as the second passage implies, that the experience of God is existentially prior to explicit knowledge of God, or to explicit knowledge of God through Christ. All human beings have an experience of God by virtue of the experience of moral conscience, though not all human beings have an experience of God *as God*. But precisely what 'moral conscience' ought to mean is a problem I will have to take up later.

### *Three objections*

According to Vatican II moral conscience is, then, itself a mode of the experience of God, though it is not necessarily a mode of explicit knowledge of God. There are several reasons, however, for thinking such a view incredible.

The first of the difficulties is obvious. The hypothesis that moral conscience is a mode of the experience of God *assumes rather than demonstrates* that language about God can be both meaningful and true. This assumption is clearly not a common one in our culture or in any other. Many people in our own culture simply claim to have no experience of God. It is common knowledge, furthermore, that in other cultures, several major religious traditions have analysed the experience of moral conscience in nontheistic ways.

Anyone who uses theistic language bears the burden of establishing

that such language is meaningful. Only when its meaningfulness is secure can one even begin to consider whether theistic language is credible. That the documents of Vatican II do not undertake such a foundational philosophical and theological project is understandable, but Catholic theologians have responsibility for undertaking it when they interpret and criticise the documents.

Having said this, I must go on to make an observation about my interpretation of the teaching of Vatican II, which will also apply to my constructive defense of it. This account of moral conscience should not be confused with a moral argument for the existence of God. The movement of my interpretation is from a theological point of view to an anthropological one and not vice versa. That is, I do not claim the experience of moral conscience to be a conclusive reason for believing in God; I am claiming that what Christians mean by 'God' is explainable partly in terms of the experience of moral conscience. Put differently, my hypothesis is of the form: if talk about the God to whom Christians bear witness is meaningful at all, then entailed in that meaning is that moral conscience is a mode of the experience of this God.

A second objection to my hypothesis is that the 'dictates of conscience' are so variously understood and so frequently ambiguous that it is reasonable to suspect they are not a common feature of human experience, and, accordingly, that they are not inscribed in our hearts by God. It is easy to mistake the authority of 'the dictates of conscience' for divine authority when in fact it is perhaps nothing more than 'the force of custom'. To make matters worse, one finds precedent in Christian tradition, as also one could find in other religious traditions, for serious revision of what was taken to be a dictate of conscience, and guaranteed as such by revelation itself.

Paul Tillich writes that

moral conscience is ambiguous in what it commands us to do or not to do. In view of innumerable historical and psychological cases, one cannot deny that there is an 'erring conscience'. The conflicts between tradition and revolution, between monism and liberality, between authority and autonomy, make a simple reliance on the 'voice of conscience' impossible. It is a risk to follow one's conscience; it is a greater risk to contradict it. But if it is uncertain, this greater risk is required. Therefore, although it is safer to follow one's conscience, the result may be disastrous, revealing the ambiguity of conscience and leading to the quest for a moral certainty which in temporal life is given only fragmentarily and through anticipation (Tillich III, 48).

What Paul required of Peter was just such a violation of the voice of conscience in order to do what was right: i.e., to break down all barriers to Christian community, including racial ones—to eat with 'unclean' Gentiles.

A third major difficulty challenging my hypothesis is the putative conflict between authority and autonomy. It seems to me naive to argue that dependence upon an external authority destroys freedom altogether, for dependence itself presupposes what is alleged to be destroyed. Where there is no freedom there can be no dependence. All the same, the notion of moral conscience as a mode of the experience of God is challenged by modern understandings of the conditions of morality insofar as moral imagination, if not self-determination, appears to be hampered by divine self-communication.

### *Differing meanings of 'moral conscience'*

I think these three difficulties facing my hypothesis can be overcome, and I propose to show how by introducing a distinction between two meanings of 'moral conscience'. Because moral conscience is a systematically ambiguous term, this distinction brings a needed level of precision into the discussion. And the real trouble with the passages I cited from the Vatican II documents is just that they do not clearly distinguish between the two meanings I have in mind.

Theologians commonly distinguish between two meanings of the term, faith: the subjective act of believing (*fides qua creditur*); and the objective beliefs believed in (*fides qua creditur*). I contend there are also two identifiable meanings of the term moral conscience, and that these correspond to the two meanings of faith. First, 'moral conscience' refers to the subjective demand to respond to God's self-communicating presence; and, second, 'moral conscience' refers to 'the objective standards of conduct' by which we attempt to make explicit for ourselves the obligations to moral life that confront us all insofar as we exist as human beings at all.

The first meaning of moral conscience (or the 'dictates of conscience') thus refers to a mode of experience so basic that how we respond to it determines who we are. Our response to this experience is not, then, intellectual assent but a personal decision about the kind of persons we will be, a decision, in other words, that affects all that we do and are. This kind of existential decision which confronts us requires a response of our whole being. Now a decision so basic as to be able to determine who we are, not in this or that respect, but in *every* respect, can hardly be a response to a particular piece of moral information, say, to be honest, to honour one's parents, and so forth. A response to a particular moral principle would only partially determine who I am. It is not possible to be anything other than a morally fragmented person solely by committing oneself to moral principles—even if one commits oneself to all the best principles one knows, say the ten commandments. However, if one makes a decision more basic, or, we might say, an existentially prior decision to a decision to obey this or that objective standard of conduct, then what will follow from such a basic decision

will not be mere obedience to this or that principle but an openness to the determination of right behaviour that can never be wholly objectified as a standard of conduct. The voice of conscience will be given free reign to say 'do this, or do that' in accordance with the concrete circumstances of one's life. It is possible to make a basic existential decision that determines who we are so fundamentally that all of our concrete actions spring from the context of this decision. It is a decision that occurs in and through all the particular decisions we make, that is, in every act of freedom. Accordingly one can never make this decision once and for all, but it must always be faced and realized anew in every moment of existence. Just because it is existentially prior to every particular act of freedom, however, it is invisible to all but God. We see the 'fruits' of this decision, never the decision itself—not even our own decision.

Drawing on the thinking of H.R. Niebuhr (pp. 31–7) and (particularly) S.M. Ogden (pp. 68–9; 118–19): if the first meaning of 'dictates of conscience' is the subjective demand to respond to God's self-communicating presence in every moment of our existence, then the existential decision I am trying to describe is just a decision, first of all, to accept the dignity bestowed upon us by the gift and demand of God's self-communicating presence to us. We do this by trusting in the meaningfulness and worth of our lives, by trusting in the dignity essential to our existence. Second, the demand of God's gracious presence to us elicits more than a trust in the worth of our lives, it also elicits a loyalty to God in return for God's ineradicable loyal presence to us. And loyalty to God means nothing other than loyalty to all those to whom God is loyal.

The second meaning of 'moral conscience' is required by the first. It is not possible to respond in the abstract to the gift and demand of God's self-communicating presence. We can only respond in the here-and-now of our actual, concrete lives. The demand to trust and loyalty, then, must take concrete form, and human beings, therefore, always have thrust upon them the need to decide concretely what decision best embodies the trust and loyalty that determines our very existence as selves. The 'dictates of conscience', accordingly, always require formulation in objective standards of conduct as we seek to do what is right in circumstances inevitably coloured with novelty.

### *Facing the objections*

Does my distinction between the two meanings of moral conscience resolve the problems challenging the central hypothesis of this essay? It meets the first challenge only in part. I believe that I have partly explicated the meaning of 'God' by explaining how the experience of God is related to the experience of moral conscience. Insofar as my argument is successful I think that 'God' has a meaning that illuminates our common human experience as moral creatures, and, if so, I have given some reason for thinking the concept not to be meaningless.

But my argument hardly proves the truth of the assertion that God exists. No single argument, however, can 'prove' the existence of God. The trouble with arguments is that they always have unproved premises. That is why A.N. Whitehead calls proof 'a feeble second-rate procedure'. 'Unless proof has produced self-evidence,' he explains, 'and thereby rendered itself unnecessary, it has issued in a second-rate state of mind...' (48). The only way to 'prove' that God exists is to dispense with the need for proof altogether by showing that the moral demand to trust in the worth of life and to be loyal to the whole 'realm of being', as Niebuhr puts it (33), is an ineradicable condition of existence, and that what is meant by 'God' is nothing other than the explicit meaning of the moral demand upon which the whole meaning and worth of our lives is predicated and from which we can never escape. In other words the only kind of argument for the existence of God that can possibly succeed is one that makes explicit the unavoidable faith we have in God already as human beings. This can be done only by fully clarifying the meaning of 'God'; and I say 'unavoidable faith' because no human being can avoid responding either positively or negatively to the self-communicating presence of God, whose very presence to us grants us the possibility of existence as moral selves. However, just those premises that make explicit the unavoidable faith we have as human beings, when they are made fully explicit render any argument for the existence of God a 'feeble second-rate procedure'. When it becomes clear what 'God' means, to deny God's existence can, in my view, be done only by denying what we can never wholly deny, viz., that our lives have meaning and worth. Does this mean that arguments for the credibility of theistic language are not necessary to theological inquiry? On the contrary. Only by as many arguments as are needed to make fully explicit the meaning of 'God' can the meaning and truth of theistic language be secured.

The second challenge to my hypothesis I believe to be successfully met by my distinction between the two meanings of 'moral conscience'. The 'dictates of conscience' in the first sense are not relative or ambiguous at all; they are the one reliable certainty we may have in life just because the gift and demand of God's self-communicating presence is not a sporadic but a constant feature of human experience. But since the concrete circumstances in which human beings must respond to the gift and demand of God's presence are always particular and coloured with novelty, the objective standards of conduct by which we explicitly formulate the concrete meaning of God's gift and demand are always relative. Tillich is right, I think, that 'moral certainty ... in temporal life is given only fragmentarily and through anticipation'. The reason is that making explicit the meaning of God's gift and demand *is itself part of the demand of moral life. It is our job, not God's, to determine how appropriately to respond in our concrete circumstances with trust and loyalty to God's presence to us.* Thus, as Rahner wrote, for 'believers and unbelievers alike... there are no ultimate basic attitudes, no absolute

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standards of value or systems of co-ordinates for determining the meaning of existence such as might enable them to evade the struggles and hazards entailed in the responsible exercise of freedom' (49).

This quotation from Rahner suggests the solution to the third challenge confronting my hypothesis about the relation of moral conscience to the experience of God. The moral demand given in the 'dictates of conscience' does not contradict human autonomy but is the condition of the possibility of human autonomy. Without the gift and demand of God's presence to us, then, we cannot be free and autonomous creatures with the marvellous capacity to create new values, to influence our own destinies and the destinies of others too. The 'dictates of conscience' do not impose objective standards of conduct upon us, but, rather, place the demand upon us to formulate objective standards of conduct in ever new and changing circumstances. Genuine freedom is found, then, in responding positively to the self-communicating presence of God. Genuine freedom manifests itself in explicit trust in the meaningfulness and worth of life and in loyalty to all those creatures to whom God is loyal.

My conclusion, then, is that the understanding of the relationship between moral conscience and the experience of God that one finds in the documents of Vatican II is patient of clarification and of a credible defence.

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