CrossMark

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

Συνείδησις in Paul's Texts and Stoic Self-Perception

Annalisa Phillips Wilson

Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge, 25 West Road, CB3 9DP
Email: annalisaphillipswilson@gmail.com

Abstract

Συνείδησις is a relatively rare word, but a favourite for Paul, whose undisputed texts contain nearly half of its New Testament occurrences. In the 19th and 20th centuries, scholars debated the origin of the substantive and the possibility of Stoic influence, which led to a consensus that the term was not a technical philosophical one and Paul's use was not affected by Stoic thought. There is evidence, though, that the presence of συνείδησις in a few Stoic texts is due to its semantic relationship in Stoic discourse with συναίσθησις, the Stoic term for self-perception, which was a key component in their epistemological and ethical theory. This article argues that a reading of Paul's use of συνείδησις as Stoic self-perception explains the distinctive features of his use to which scholars have recently drawn attention, namely, the permanent and continuous operation of the συνείδησις, its ability to be passively impacted by the actions of others and the neutral or positive content of its reflexive knowledge. After a review of recent scholarship, I discuss the role of συναίσθησις in Stoic theory and the evidence for its semantic relationship to συνείδησις, then offer a reading of 1 Cor 8–10 demonstrating Paul's use of συνείδησις as self-perception.

Keywords: Paul; συνείδησις; Stoicism; conscience; idol food; Pauline ethics; 1 Corinthians 8–10; Stoic epistemology

I. Scholarship on Paul's Use of συνείδησις and its Relationship to Stoicism

Συνείδησις is a term of interest almost exclusive to biblical studies and one especially favoured by Paul, yet Pauline scholars still have a surprising lack of clarity about his use of it. Earlier scholarship often specified Stoicism as an influence on Paul's use of the term. C. A. Pierce directly attacked this view in 1955 by arguing that, since there were only three extant Stoic uses of this substantive, συνείδησις was not a technical philosophical term and Paul's use reflected 'everyday colloquial usage'.[1] In 1971, Jewett described a consensus that Paul's use 'derived not from Stoic philosophy but from popular

---

[1] C. A. Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1955), 14–16. He references Chrysippus in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* VII.85; Pseudo-Epictetus *Frag.* 97; Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* VI.30. 2. Pierce cites the suspicions of classicists that the first two are spurious or corrupted and notes that Marcus Aurelius is too late to have influenced Paul. For examples of scholarship citing Stoic influence, cf. C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1932), 35; Paul Althaus, *Der Brief an die Römer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1932), 25–6. Stoic influence was earlier questioned by Martin Kähler, *Das Gewissen: Ethische Untersuchung Die Entwicklung seiner Namen und seines Begriffes* (Halle: Julius Fride, 1878). For reviews of scholarship on the term in Paul, see Hans-Joachim Eckstein, *Der Begriff Syneidesis bei Paulus* (WUNT; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1983), 13–34; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 640–4; Philip Bosman, *Conscience in Philo and Paul* (WUNT; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 28–47.

koine usage'. Pierce defined συνείδησις as 'inward pain' felt after transgression, but Jewett considered this definition inadequate and noted that Paul's uses conveyed a sense of 'inviolable autonomy'.[2] While Jewett felt that Pierce had dealt the 'final death blow' to scholarly interest in Stoic influence upon Paul's use of the term, he admitted that particular features of Paul's use were difficult to explain in light of its use in '*koinē*' discourse.[3] Eckstein's later analysis confirmed the neutrality of the συνείδησις in Paul's texts—it was not just an 'inward pain' only related to transgression, but a 'neutral anthropological mechanism' available to all, an 'inner entity' which assessed in accordance with given norms.[4] Eckstein argued this view primarily on the basis of Paul's texts, clarifying the distinctive characteristics of Paul's use of the term and the puzzle of its relationship to colloquial use.

Bosman's analysis of Philo and Paul reinforced many of Eckstein's conclusions and contributed extensive philological work. He traced the formation of the substantives from the verbal phrase σύνοιδα + A + B ('I know with + someone + something') and demonstrated that the substantival constructions come into frequent usage only around the turn of the era.[5] He explains that, in the period preceding the substantives' development, the verbal phrase commonly described the reflexive knowledge (with oneself) of wrongdoing. In Philo's use of συνειδός, the assumption of the negative content (wrongdoing) of the knowledge involved is evidenced by the need for qualification. For Philo, a 'pure conscience' is an entity without knowledge of wrongdoing; the verbal phrase had assumed that the content of the 'knowing' was wrongdoing, and without a qualifier, the reader would assume knowledge of something negative. Philo's use conceives of a 'co-knowing' of the absence of wrongdoing, evidencing a 'tendency towards neutrality' for the substantive. According to Bosman, this 'tendency' of Philo's use, though, is 'established' in Paul's.[6] Paul's συνείδησις does not assume knowledge of wrongdoing and can do so without qualification—Paul can appeal simply διὰ τὴν συνείδησιν (1 Cor 10.25, 28, 29), a use of the term which Bosman notes, other comparable literature 'shed(s) little light' on.[7] Since the σύνοιδα word group usually referred to knowledge of wrongdoing, which produced shame and prevented unhindered speech, this word group and παρρησία normally 'were mutually exclusive'.[8] Paul's συνείδησις, though, is the ground of his boast (καύχησις, 2 Cor 1.12) and the Corinthians' (2 Cor 5.11), and with παρρησία (2 Cor 3.12), he commends himself to the Corinthians' συνείδησις (4.2). This latter reference highlights another feature of Paul's use which Bosman notes: the 'strikingly' passive role the συνείδησις can have. Usually what one 'knows with oneself' was one's own actions, not those of others, and Bosman describes Paul's description of the knowledgeable's behaviour directly damaging the weak's συνείδησις in 1 Cor 8.12 as 'a use not found anywhere in Greek literature before Paul'.[9] Since the 'knowing with oneself' was about one's own wrongdoing, it could not normally be directly impacted by another. In short, Bosman not only confirms much of the pattern described by Eckstein but also

---

[2] Robert Jewett, *Paul's Anthropological Terms: A Study of Their Use in Conflict Settings* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 420. Cf. Pierce, *Conscience*, 108.

[3] Jewett attributed these features to Corinthian Gnostics, *Terms,* 421–39.

[4] Eckstein, *Syneidesis*, 311–13, my translations; on his rejection of Stoic influence, cf. 65–6. J. Stelzenberger, *Syneidesis, Conscientia, Gewissen: Studie zum Bedeutungswandel eines moraltheologischen Begriffes* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1963) similarly analyses only Paul's use but, unlike Eckstein, does not believe that Paul has one consistent meaning for the term.

[5] Bosman, *Conscience,* 61–3.

[6] Bosman, *Conscience,* 266.

[7] Bosman, *Conscience*, 221.

[8] Bosman, *Conscience*, 267.

[9] Bosman, *Conscience*, 216; cf. 224, 265–6 (on 10.27–9); cf. 211.

details the particular ways in which this pattern aligns with or departs from the term's use in the wider, colloquial discourse.

Eckstein's and Bosman's analyses have shed light on Paul's use of the term; at the same time, they have demonstrated that aspects of his use are enigmatic in light of wider discourse. More specifically, Paul's use of συνείδησις is distinctive in that it is, first, a permanent anthropological entity (rather than one normally present alongside wrong-doing); second, it can be impacted by others (not only one's own actions); and, third, the content of its knowledge can be neutral, even positive, so much so that it stands in positive relation to boasting and boldness. In what follows, I will argue that these features of Paul's use of συνείδησις can be explained by attention to the Stoic discursive context.[10] I will first explain the role of συναίσθησις in Stoic theory, along with the evidence that συνείδησις shared its semantic field in Stoic discourse, and then demonstrate that this sense is operative in Paul's uses of συνείδησις with a reading of 1 Corinthians 8–10.

II. Role of συναίσθησις in Stoic Theory

Συναίσθησις, variously translated as 'self-perception' or 'co-perception', is a component of Stoic epistemology. Stoic epistemology was empiricist and began with impressions (φαντασίαι) which were imprinted (τυπόω) on the soul. For a rational being, impressions included propositions (ἀξίωμα) to which one could assent (or withhold assent). Crucially, there were two kinds of impressions: non-cataleptic and cataleptic (καταληπτικά), the latter being the impression that literally 'grasps' reality and the former that fails to do so. Cataleptic impressions were considered the criterion of truth, provided, according to later Stoics, that there was no obstacle (ἔνστημα); they were the foundation of knowledge.[11]

To construct knowledge, one must first firmly assent to cataleptic impressions. Such assent to a cataleptic impression results in a cognition (κατάληψις, literally a 'grasping') which, held more firmly still and unshakeable by any argument, becomes knowledge (ἐπιστήμη). Zeno illustrated the development of knowledge by holding out a hand: the palm lay open, receiving a cataleptic impression, the fingers curled slightly in assent, then made a fist as a cognition, then he squeezed this fist tightly with his other hand—this final stage was identified as knowledge.[12]

This process usually went awry at numerous points. Most rational beings regularly assented to non-cataleptic impressions (which did not 'grasp' reality) or, even when assenting to cataleptic impressions, gave their assent too weakly. Even a cognition, a grasp of truth obtained through assent to a cataleptic impression, could be held too weakly, which was illustrated by Chrysippus with the example of cognitions acquired by custom (συνήθεια)—such grasps of truth were easily shaken.[13] It was important to avoid such error, though, since rational animals acted on the basis of their assessment of and assent to impressions: assent sets off impulse and action. Specifically, actions

---

[10] Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 375, agrees that the consensus that συνείδησις is not a technical Stoic term is correct, but notes that scholarship has failed to appreciate the 'added importance' the notion of 'self-awareness' had in Stoic theory.

[11] A. A. Long and David N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 239–40. Cf. J. Annas, 'Stoic Epistemology', in *Companions to Ancient Thought, Vol. 1: Epistemology* (ed. S. Everson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 184–203; R. J. Hankinson, 'Stoic Epistemology', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics* (ed. B. Inwood; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 59–84; cf. Michael Frede, 'Stoics and Skeptics on Clear and Distinct Impressions' in *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (ed. M. Frede; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 151–76.

[12] Cicero, *Acad. pr.* II.145.

[13] Plutarch, *Stoic. rep.* 1036c. Custom could be a source of cataleptic impressions or non-cataleptic; the point was that such impressions might not be assented to with the requisite strength.

rely upon assent to an impression's proposition that something is κατὰ φύσιν (according to nature) for the rational agent.[14] Stoic epistemology was inextricably linked with its ethical theory: rational ethical agents acted virtuously (or otherwise) because of their skill (or lack thereof) in the assessment of impressions and their unwavering strength at each level of cognition. Assenting to only the right kind of impressions, withholding assent from others and assenting in the fashion that builds knowledge are all part of the wise man's expertise. For Epictetus, the 'right use of impressions' was 'moral intelligence at work', the necessary training for those hoping to live wisely and thereby attain εὐδαιμονία.[15]

A perception (αἴσθησις) in Stoic theory was one type of impression that people would receive and need to assess in order to progress to wisdom. The Stoics highlighted the role of one particular perception—self-perception—as the basis for the impulses of οἰκείωσις. In Stoic theory, οἰκείωσις is the inclination towards whatever 'belongs' to or is fitting for a being,[16] a 'dispositional impulse',[17] to view itself as belonging to itself and then particular external things and people as belonging to itself on that basis. Chrysippus said that the first thing that an animal has affinity with or that 'belongs' to an animal is its own constitution and its perception of that constitution: self-perception.[18]

This fragment from Chrysippus uses συνείδησις to refer to self-perception, but συναίσθησις was the term more commonly used in the handful of Stoic texts which discuss this notion and concentrate on the rudimentary self-perception of non-rational animals or pre-rational humans (children). Some have found συνείδησις ill-fitting at this point in Diogenes Laertius' treatment since he comments on all animals (including non-rational ones) and συνείδησις could be seen to imply rational activity.[19] Even if the term does imply rational activity (which is debatable) and it is out of place, the term conceivably could still have referenced self-perception of rational beings, since the self-perception of adult humans (like all their impressions) would include propositions and elicit assent and thus be a rational psychological function.

There are only a handful of Stoic texts that discuss συναίσθησις, and they primarily reference non-rational beings, but a few texts discuss the self-perception of rational beings with the language of rationality. For example, in several places where Epictetus discusses συναίσθησις, he uses variants of εἶδον and οἶδα to discuss the συναίσθησις of rational beings.[20] In one epistle, Seneca describes animals' and pre-rational humans'

---

[14] Cf. Epictetus, *Diatr.* I.18.1–4 *et passim.*

[15] Long and Sedley, *Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 1, 241; Cf. Epictetus, *Diatr.* I.1.7–12; I.6.12–18; I.20.1–16; IV.6.28–35, *et passim*; A. A. Long, *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2002), 75–86.

[16] On οἰκείωσις, cf. S. Magrin, 'Nature and Utopia in Epictetus' Theory of *Oikeiōsis*', *Phronesis* 63 (2018), 293–350; Jacob Klein, 'The Stoic Argument from *Oikeiōsis*', *OSAP* 50 (2016), 143–200; A. A. Long, 'Hierocles on *Oikeiōsis* and Self-Perception,' in *Stoic Studies,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 250–63 (258–60); Max J. Lee, *Moral Transformation in Greco-Roman Philosophy of Mind: Mapping the Moral Milieu of the Apostle Paul and his Diaspora Jewish Contemporaries* (WUNT; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 375–400.

[17] The phrase of Magrin, '*Oikeiōsis*', 293.

[18] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, VII.85.

[19] Hence, the suggestion of Max Pohlenz, *Paulus und die Stoa* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1964), 15, that συνείδησις is a corruption. Cf. Adolf Dyroff, *Die Ethik der alten Stoa* (Berlin: Calvary, 1897), 37. However, the oldest MSS of Diogenes Laertius' text all use συνείδησις and the fact that this is not a common, technical Stoic term renders it the *lectio difficilior* (I am indebted to George Boys-Stones for this point). On the manuscript evidence and on this reference in particular, see Tiziano Dorandi, ed., *Diogenes Laertius: Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1–58, 524; cf. Don E. Marietta Jr., 'Conscience in Greek Stoicism', *Numen* (1970), 176–87.

[20] Epictetus, *Diatr.* I.2.11 (cf. I.2.30, 32); I.4.10; II.11.1–13 (note the similar use of αἴσθησις here to συνιδών in II.19.1); II.17.23–8; II.21.8–10. Cf. Stobaeus *Ecl.* II.69, which mentions φρονίμην αἴσθησιν and ἄφρονα αἴσθησιν. On the other hand, Galen cites Chrysippus' use of συναισθάνομαι to describe people's common self-perception of

perception (*sensus*) of their constitution and clarifies that this perceiving is not the same as to understand (*intellego*) the *definition* of his constitution.[21] A non-rational animal 'does not know what an animal is; he feels himself to be an animal', says Seneca. By way of analogy, he points to the ignorance (*nescio*) of rational adults concerning particular features of the soul, even though they know (*scio*) that they have souls. Just as rational beings have this perception (*sensus*) of souls, so non-rational animals have a perception of their constitution. Seneca's argument does not lead him to explicitly discuss the self-perception of rational beings, but it demonstrates that *sensus*, referring to the perception of both rational and non-rational beings, could be used interchangeably with terms referring to rational thought (*scio*) when applicable. In other words, while self-perception tended to appear in arguments about non-rational animals and συναίσθησις was the suitable term for such discussions, the language of rational thought could be used to discuss the self-perception of rational beings.[22]

Furthermore, even if συνείδησις was not a technical term in Stoic theory, if Chrysippus (or others) occasionally used συνείδησις to refer to self-perception, then Stoic discourse could have retained and developed a wider semantic range for the σύνοιδα word group. Epictetus' use of the σύνοιδα word group, in fact, deviates from the colloquial pattern of use traced by Bosman. Specifically, it can reference reflexive knowledge of neutral, even markedly positive, actions and character (rather than wrongdoing), and it can be aligned with (rather than opposed to) boldness and authority.[23] In one case, it is precisely the wise man's συνειδός that gives him authority (ἐξουσία) and boldness in speech (θαρρήσῃ παρρησιάζεσθαι).[24] To summarise, in this period of rapid development for substantives from the σύνοιδα word group, this atypical pattern of use along with the handful of substantives in Stoic texts and what we know of Stoic theory suggests that

---

the heart as the location of the passions and ἡγεμονικόν, a statement which likely includes reference to adults (*SVF* II.886; II.887; II.900; II.911).

[21] Seneca, *Ep.* 121.5–13. Cf. also *Ep.* 97.12–13 where those who do not have a *bona conscientia* have, nonetheless, a primitive *sensus* of good which they disregard. Cicero, *Fin.* III.16 (like Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, VII.85) discusses appropriation on the basis of a sense of itself (*sensus sui*). The relationship of the Latin *conscientia* to συνείδησις is difficult to assess; arguments have been made for dependency both ways and for complete independence; cf. Eckstein, *Syneidesis*, 72–8; Bosman, *Conscience*, 72–5. The σύνοιδα substantives' fluidity in meaning during this period likely hinder an identifiable relationship. According to Bosman, *conscientia* retained non-reflexive uses later than the σύνοιδα word group, which, it should be noted, rendered it ill-suited to refer to *self*-perception (an inherently reflexive notion) without extension.

[22] It is also possible that some Stoics used the language in a non-technical fashion to speak of self-perception, even of non-rational beings. J. M. Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 44–5, notes that Plutarch, citing Chrysippus, uses ἀντίληψις of non-rational animals' appropriation (cf. *Stoic. rep.* 1038b).

[23] Epictetus, *Diatr.* III.23.15, where reflexivity is specified (ἄνθρωπος συνειδὼς ἑαυτῷ μηθὲν ἀγαθόν) and the content of the knowledge is a student's lack of something good in contrast to the words of flattery. This construction describing a *lack* of specific content of self-perception is similar to 1 Cor 4.4 and seems to be neutral (the student could be aware of something *good*). In *Ench.* 34, one can know with oneself the victory of withholding assent to the impression of pleasure; again, the content of the knowledge is positive. For other arguably neutral uses of the σύνοιδα word group, cf. *Diatr.* II.19.1; *Ench.* 32. While Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* VI.30.2 is much later, its continuity with Epictetus' uses should be noted: the emperor hopes to find peace through knowledge of his own good moral character. It is true, as Pierce noted, that this is too late to have influenced the NT, but Marcus Aurelius is influenced by earlier Stoics who influenced earlier Jewish authors. Cf. Bosman, *Conscience*, 29–30, on Pierce's hasty dismissal of indirect, popular Stoic influence on the NT. Dio Chrysostom, on the other hand, uses the word group mostly in the pattern of use described by Bosman, that is, reflexive knowledge of wrongdoing; cf. *Dei cogn.* 9; *Nicom.* 1; *Diod.* 1; *1 Glor.* 5. However, he can also use the verb in a non-reflexive fashion; cf. *4 Regn.* 38; *2 Serv. lib.* 8; *2 Tars.* 28, illustrating the state of fluidity for this word group at the turn of the era, as noted by Bosman, *Conscience*, 62–3.

[24] Epictetus, *Diatr.* III.22.94–6. In this case, much like Paul's uses, the nominal aspect of the substantive is predominant since it is the subject of the verb (δίδωμι) and is unqualified while the context makes clear that the cynic knows of his own harmony with divine Nature.

in at least some Stoic discourse συνείδησις shared a semantic field with συναίσθησις, the technical term for self-perception in Stoic theory. As a result, συνείδησις and the σύνοιδα word group had a wider semantic range in Stoic discourse than in colloquial use.

The most extensive discussion of the Stoic notion of self-perception is a treatise by Hierocles which features the crucial role of self-perception in connection with οἰκείωσις and all impulsive actions towards what is 'fitting' or κατὰ φύσιν ('in accordance with nature'). Hierocles argues that non-rational animals' self-perception is continuously operative throughout life and that this self-perception is demonstrated by animals' use of their body parts to defend themselves.[25] This latter argument, Inwood notes, makes the interesting point that 'self-perception is the necessary condition for any perception of external objects'.[26] The purpose of the animal's actions is to preserve itself, and the animal cannot perceive what will suit that purpose, providing benefit to be gained or harm to be avoided, without perception of its own constitution. An animal recognises predators and finds edible food, selections and actions that are only sensible as perceptions based on perception of its own constitution. Hierocles defends the inextricable and continuous link between self-perception and all other impressions: all perceptions of external things are either based on self-perception (which is itself constantly changing) or continually involve self-perception.[27]

Συναίσθησις is a perception, a type of impression and a basic component of Stoic epistemology. As one of the primary things to which a person had affinity, though, self-perception was understood as the basis of all subsequent impulses and actions and as a continuously operative perception that interacted with one's perceptions of everything else. What a person perceives about his or her constitution determines how they assess everything else and all their actions and selections throughout life. All phenomena external to a person are assessed either in relation to or 'through the filter of' their 'particular physical constitution' with the result, according to Boys-Stones, that 'the moral character developed by an individual might be based precisely on their experience of their physical constitution'.[28] Nothing an ethical agent does is disconnected from their sense of self; all actions are, as it were, tethered to self-perception, arising partly from this basis and expressing a relationship between the agent and whatever it has assented to as 'fitting'. All human behaviour was viewed as arising out of impulses indicating assent to an impression which is inevitably connected to self-perception: a thief steals because she assents to the proposition that the object is 'fitting' for her, indicating something about her perception of her constitution. As Inwood explains, Hierocles' argument illustrates that the Stoics viewed 'all purposive action (as) relational, based on a view however inchoate of the agent's relation to the world'.[29] Although other schools had their own notions of οἰκείωσις and some discussed self-perception, Stoic theory postulated an

---

[25] As outlined by Brad Inwood, 'Hierocles: Theory and Argument in the Second Century AD', in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy,* vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), 151–83. Cf. George Boys-Stones, 'Physiognomy and Ancient Psychological Theory', in *Seeing the Face, Seeing the Soul: Polemon's Physiognomy from Classical Antiquity to Medieval Islam*, ed. S. Swain (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 19–124 (84–5).

[26] Inwood, 'Hierocles', 157. Cf. Cicero, *Fin.* III.16.

[27] At points, Hierocles states that an animal has συναίσθησις of an external object which leads Boys-Stones to argue that it should be understood as 'co-perception', a perception of externals 'which involves self-perception' rather than being identical to it ('Physiognomy', 84). This builds on the view of Inwood, 'Hierocles,' who states that 'all grasp of external objects of perception entails self-perception' (166). At other points Hierocles seems to use συναίσθησις synonymously with αἴσθησις ἑαυτοῦ, leading some to read it as simple self-perception, albeit continuously involved in all other perceptions. Cf. Long, 'Hierocles', 258–60; Ilaria Ramelli, *Hierocles the Stoic: Elements of Ethics, Fragments, and Excerpts* (Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 41.

[28] Boys-Stones, 'Physiognomy', 86.

[29] Inwood, 'Hierocles', 177–8.

inseparable link between self-perception and the primary impulses of οἰκείωσις, a connection that then afforded explanatory power for basically every action of an ethical agent.

There were numerous aspects of one's nature that determined what 'belonged' to oneself, selections and activities that were, according to the Stoics, defensibly 'preferred' and 'appropriate'. The nature of humans as the only rational animals dictated that virtue was universally most 'fitting' for them and the only genuinely beneficial 'good'. Therefore, the 'preferreds' and 'appropriate activities' were only to be selected or performed, so long as they do not conflict with virtue or participate in vice.[30] Boys-Stones hypothesises that Stoics may have considered συναίσθησις to play a role in shaping vicious moral character, when self-perception remained 'fixated on the local needs of the physical constitution' and overestimated the value of 'fitting' selections, mistaking what was harmful or beneficial to one's pre-rational constitution for genuine evil or good (which was only vice and virtue in Stoic theory).[31] Ideally, though, virtue perfected the 'preferred' selections and 'appropriate' activities, transforming καθήκοντα (the appropriate activities) into 'right actions', the κατορθώματα. In other words, the sage's actions, fully right, would normally include the same activities that belonged to his particular constitution and were judged 'appropriate', with the proviso that they did not conflict with virtue. Although it does not explicitly reference self-perception, Cicero's discussion of the *four personae,* based on the work of the Stoic Panaetius, evidences the level of differentiation possible for ethical agents within Stoic theory.[32] Each person, Cicero says, should maintain the characteristics of their own nature so long as they are not vicious and do not oppose reason, the primary aspect of their nature and the only constituent of εὐδαιμονία.[33]

Inwood explains that the notions of οἰκείωσις and self-perception were used both descriptively and normatively in Stoic theory. The affinity of beings with themselves and particular things can be observed and analysed, but for these affinities to be meaningful, to function normatively, they must be 'brought into the cognitive world of that agent'.[34] Seneca discusses self-perception in reply to Lucilius' request for help avoiding fear and desire. Seneca admits that the topic of animals' self-perception seems remote from this request (121.5), but he says, you will understand what to choose and what to avoid after learning what you owe your nature (121.3).[35] In other words, progress towards virtue relies upon perception of yourself as a rational being to whom such behaviour 'belongs', like milk to an infant.

In Stoic theory, self-perception was the perception of one's own constitution and the basis for the permanent dispositional inclination of οἰκείωσις and thus the chronological and logical foundation for other impulses and actions.[36] Self-perception operated continuously alongside other impressions as the basis of a person's relationship to external things. This close connection between self-perception and action meant that embodied experience played a significant role in epistemological development and ethical progress,

---

[30] Brad Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 210: 'An adult continues to pursue those things which are preferred, but always in such a way that in case of a conflict with his pursuit of the good the impulse to the good will override his selection of the preferred thing ... This seems to be the practical significance of the often repeated statements that virtue alone is to be chosen for its own sake and that the good has a kind of value different in kind from that of natural things'.

[31] Boys-Stones, 'Physiognomy', 87.

[32] Cicero, *Off.* I.107–14.

[33] Cicero, *Off.* I.110.

[34] Inwood, 'Hierocles', 172.

[35] On the relationship between this letter and Cicero's *four personae*, cf. Brad Inwood, *Seneca: Selected Philosophical Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 334–5.

[36] Long and Sedley, *Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 1, 240

a project that Stoic texts demonstrate could be quite differentiated with the proviso that such selections did not conflict with virtue, the only true good. This project was precarious, though, and therapeutic texts emphasised the importance of 'right use of impressions'. Stoic epistemology was intended not only to explain but to train in the skill of virtue, to teach the correct motivation of activity and the construction of knowledge towards the end of a flourishing life, which could not be attained without accurate self-perception.

III. Συνείδησις as Self-perception in 1 Cor 8–10

As mentioned, usage of συνείδησις increased dramatically around the turn of the era, and it was especially prominent in ancient Jewish and early Christian texts. Out of its 30 appearances in the NT, 14 are found in Paul's undisputed corpus and over half of these occurrences occur in 1 Cor 8–10, a section addressing idol food.[37] Paul addresses those in the community who have 'knowledge', which is summarised in 8.4–6. They know that idols are 'nothing' in the *cosmos* and that there is no God except one. While there are many so-called 'gods', for the Jesus-believers there is only one God, the Father, from whom are all things and to whom the believers exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, including the believers. It seems that those with this knowledge have argued that it provides a basis for the consumption of idol food, a practice that elicits a warning from Paul. However, Paul appears to agree with them that the idols are 'nothing', and he carefully maintains the neutrality of the idols and their food throughout the section.[38]

At first glance, the opening of 8.1–3 can seem immaterial or somewhat abstract, but Paul's ethical reasoning on the topic is anchored in his statements here. Love builds, and any valid knowledge—the 'knowing as it is necessary to know'—expresses itself as love to God and is grounded in God's knowledge of the believer. In other words, they will construct genuine knowledge for ethical reasoning through love as a response to God's relationship with them. Their love to God evidences that he knows them, or, to express it in analogy with Stoicism, they have affinity with God to whom they belong. As Paul says in 8.6, all things are 'from' him and the believers are 'to' him. Those known by God love him, a love that necessarily entails building, rather than destroying, what is his.

In 8.7, Paul moves to warn them that their knowledge, correct insofar as it goes, is an insufficient basis for their activity since they have failed to take into account all the relevant factors. Namely, some of the believers do not have this knowledge. He then details the epistemological problem: some, through custom up until now of idols, eat the food as idol food, and their self-perception, being weak, is defiled. While food itself cannot present us as superior or inferior to God, the authority to use this food could become an obstacle (πρόσκομμα) to the weak, Paul explains and then describes the scenario he imagines. A weak community member would see a knowledgeable one reclining in the temple, presumably at a meal, and their self-perception, being weak, would be 'built up' to eat idol food. In this way, the weak member (one for whom Christ died) will be destroyed and, according to Paul, when the knowledgeable 'strikes' (τύπτω) this believer's weak συνείδησις, they sin against Christ.

---

[37] Scholars consider the περὶ δέ formula to introduce topics raised by the Corinthians (cf. 7.1); cf. Thiselton, *Corinthians,* 483; but cf. Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 191.

[38] Verse 4 is regarded by many to be a statement from the Corinthians, at least in part; cf. Thiselton, *Corinthians*, 628–32. Paul apparently approves of it as far as it goes, seen by his description of those without this knowledge as 'weak' in 8.7, his confirmation that food does not make one superior or inferior before God in 8.8, his recognition of their authority in 8.9 and, implicitly, in his own analogous example in chapter 9, and the reiteration that idols and food are not 'something' in 10.19.

If συνείδησις refers to self-perception, the scenario here can be understood as follows within the structure of Stoic theory. The community member who lacks knowledge is epistemologically weak, specifically in that their self-perception involved past assent to a non-cataleptic impression which does not grasp reality: the impression that idols are 'something' to which they eat when they consume idol food. They assented to this non-cataleptic impression by way of exposure to customs about idols (recall Chrysippus' statement specifically mentioning customs as a source of impressions). This weak aspect of their self-perception, shaped by previous assent to this non-cataleptic impression (that idols are 'something' related to idol food), prevents them from receiving key cataleptic impressions. An example Stoics used to explain obstacles to cataleptic impressions was Menelaus' initial refusal to believe that Helen was in Egypt because he thought Helen was on the ship. The non-cataleptic impression of the phantom Helen prevented Menelaus from receiving the cataleptic impression of the real Helen. Similarly, Paul imagines that the weak self-perception of some believers will prevent them from grasping the reality of what they see as they pass by the temple. Their weak self-perception, informed by non-cataleptic impressions about idols and idol food, is incapable of receiving the cataleptic impression of a fellow Jesus-believer eating in the temple to 'nothing'. Instead, they will assent to the *non*-cataleptic impression that a Jesus-believer is eating idol food *as to* idols, which will create a new obstacle to their reception of cataleptic impressions about idols as 'nothing'. This impression, that Jesus-believers eat idol food *to* idols, will augment their weak self-perception, 'building it up' to eat *to* idols, an action that, in their condition, would be destructive. In these circumstances, the knowledgeable's actions are against Christ and this believer, whose weak self-perception their actions would 'strike'. Perhaps, since he is portraying the knowledgeable's activity as an impression received by the weak, Paul's choice of τύπτω to describe the knowledgeable's activity echoes τυπόω, the word used by Stoics for the 'imprinting' of impressions.[39] Paul's language is slightly different from extant Stoic descriptions in its use of πρόσκομμα and τύπτω, but these choices might be attributed to his lexicon and rhetorical aims, with the more violent τύπτω heightening the sense of destruction the knowledgeable inflict.[40]

Several features of this passage are elucidated by a reading of συνείδησις as Stoic self-perception. The descriptor 'weak' for those without knowledge, rather than 'ignorant' or 'foolish', has clear reference points in Stoic epistemology. Knowledge was characterised not only by its basis in reality, but the agent's steadfast (ἀσφαλής), firm (βέβαιος) and unchanging (ἀμετάπτωτος) 'grasp' of it, as the hand-wrapped fist of Zeno vividly depicted.[41] Conversely, epistemological error was described as ἀσθενής.[42] This reading also explains the crucial role which self-perception plays in building the weak's destructive affiliation with idols and their food, as well as the mechanism by which the συνείδησις was impacted, even 'struck', by others' actions. Stoic self-perception was continuously involved in the agent's use of all other impressions, so that the previously-established self-perception could be reinforced or altered by new impressions, such as seeing someone in a temple. Paul is concerned to prevent the weak from misjudging their affinity with idols, a destructive misjudgement. On the other hand, the knowledgeable should deduce that if they belong 'to God' 'through Christ', then their fellow believer, for whom Christ died, 'belongs', by extension, to them, and they must support

---

[39] It means to 'beat, strike, smite', but also to strike a coin, which overlaps with the 'imprinting' sense of τυπόω. LSJ, s.v 'τυπόω', I.5.

[40] Πρόσκομμα is a Pauline favourite in Romans owed to its use in the LXX.

[41] Sextus Empiricus, *Math.* VII.150–3; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives,* VII.47; Cicero, *Acad.* I.42.

[42] Long and Sedley, *Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 1, 258: '"Weakness" denotes the insecurity, instability, and inconsistency of the inferior man's mental state...'. Cf. Sextus Empiricus, *Math.* VII.157; Plutarch, *Stoic. rep.* 1056e–1057b Stobaeus, *Ecl.* II.7.5–10.

the weak's ability to receive impressions which will build their self-perception as one who acts 'to God' 'through Christ'.

In Chapter 9, Paul models the pattern of reasoning he instructs for the knowledgeable: abstaining from an activity normally 'fitting' when, in particular circumstances, it conflicts with the primary feature of his nature—orientation to Christ. To lose sight of this singular moral good by overestimating a merely 'appropriate' activity was to risk losing participation in salvation itself (9.23, 27). Chapter 10 begins by warning the knowledgeable of their own ruinous end if they follow destructive desires, participate in idolatry and thus fail to maintain their orientation to Christ. In 10.23–11.1, he recapitulates his instructions on the topic, beginning with a slogan likely repeated from the Corinthians, affirming that they can 'do all things', but supplemented with two further evaluations to include in their reasoning: what brings advantage (συμφέρω) and builds (οἰκοδομέω). Συνείδησις surfaces again as Paul gives two more examples of this reasoning process.

In 10.25, Paul instructs the believers to eat any food sold in the market without additional evaluation (ἀνακρίνω) and explains that this practice of unscrupulous eating is 'for the sake of self-perception' (διὰ τὴν συνείδησιν). In 10.26, he supports (γάρ) this instruction with a quotation of Ps 23.1b LXX, echoing the thought of 8.6: all things are from God as the earth (and its fullness) is the Lord's. Given the knowledgeable's established comfort with idol food, these instructions are likely directed to the weak. Paul instructs them to eat the food and avoid further evaluation on the basis of their assent to the impression that this food is 'from the Lord'. This is 'for the sake of self-perception' in the sense that it is done with a view to developing a strong self-perception as the basis of their actions. Paul wants the believers to assent to the cataleptic impression that the food is 'the Lord's', an impression which grasps reality about idols and God and, on this basis, to eat the food 'to God', thereby 'building up' their self-perception, correcting and strengthening it towards knowledge (in contrast to the 'building' of the faulty self-perception towards idolatry in 8.10). Further evaluation of the food beyond this may cause them to doubt the knowledge which they should strengthen, the knowledge of the reality that all things are 'from God' and they are 'to God' 'through Christ'. Paul does not direct the knowledgeable to 'educate' the weak, but he prods the weak to take the opportunity to firmly grasp the impression that all belongs to God (and thus to them) in a setting where they would not be presented with non-cataleptic impressions.[43]

The second example, in 10.27–30, is a meal hosted by an unbeliever where idol food may be served. In 10.27, Paul nearly repeats his advice on market food: eat whatever is served without additional evaluation 'for the sake of self-perception' (διὰ τὴν συνείδησιν). The believer can eat the food, presumably based on the knowledge referenced in 8.4–6 and 10.26 and thus reinforce their self-perception as one who can 'do all things' 'to God' since all is 'from God'. This advice and that for market food assume the epistemological significance of the συνείδησις, its role in assessments and the possibility that it can, vice versa, be shaped by those impressions and assessments of them. Due to its involvement in all impressions and actions and its ineliminable epistemological role, the συνείδησις has a measure of normativity, even though it is fallible: it must be functioning correctly for the believer to assess affinity to selections and activities properly and act appropriately. The statement that the believer should attend the meal 'if he wants to go' hints obliquely at possibilities for differentiation in their ethical reasoning. As Stoic theory suggested, as long as other aspects of one's particular nature and its affinities do not conflict with virtue, they are to be maintained. A believer is expected to reason by taking into account their need for food, their experience of procuring food as a gentile,

---

[43] Since presumably no cultic practices or settings would be as prominent in the market although it is impossible to rule them out completely.

their desire to eat with friends—the kind of reasoning Paul modelled in his defence of and abstinence from financial support in Chapter 9.

In 10.28, however, Paul adds a significant caveat: if someone highlights the nature of the food as sacrificial to you, do not eat.[44] The pointed nature of the fellow diner's remark is indicated by the fact that it is spoken directly 'to you' (ὑμῖν) and explicitly describes the food (τοῦτο ἱερόθυτόν ἐστιν). This provides a strange description if Paul intended to reference something like a customary prayer or common knowledge, so Paul most likely has in mind a specific remark directed at the Jesus-believer stressing the sacred nature of the food. In such circumstances, Paul explains, the Jesus-believer is to avoid eating the food 'for the sake of' the one who made this remark *and* self-perception (again, διὰ ... τὴν συνείδησιν, 10.28b). In other words, this person's comment likely indicates that their self-perception is misinformed by non-cataleptic impressions of idols and idol food. Such a weak epistemological state will prevent them from grasping the reality that you, eating such food, are not eating to idols. In that case, eating the food will reinforce their weak self-perception as one who receives benefit from idols and can eat 'to' them, a destructive set of judgements. As Paul explained in Chapter 8, he wants the Corinthians to avoid knowingly encouraging someone to act on the basis of assent to non-cataleptic impressions about idols and their food; just as they are to act out of concern for their brother or sister there, here they are to avoid eating for the sake of their fellow diner and his or her self-perception.

Paul anticipates that the Corinthians might misunderstand him to mean that the believer should act *on the basis* of the other's self-perception, and he reacts forcefully against this idea.[45] The question of 10.29b 'why would anyone else's self-perception judge my freedom?' is rhetorical, assuming that the Corinthians agree that no one else's self-perception could judge his freedom. His incredulity at the idea of the συνείδησις of ἄλλος ('another') judging his freedom is elucidated by the philological opposition of ἀλλότριος and οἰκεῖος, with which self-perception was so closely linked in Stoic theory.[46] In other words, Paul's disbelief is that someone *else's* self-perception could make a judgement about what 'belonged' to him, a judgement that could only be based on his self-perception. It is nonsensical in Stoic terms to argue that you found something fitting for oneself based on someone else's self-perception.

Paul answers this rhetorical question with another: 'if I partake with thanks, why would I be spoken ill of in reference to the thing for which I give thanks'? This can be understood as Paul's assertion that since his self-perception was the basis of his actions and he was confident that his evaluation of the food, based on this self-perception, was correct (he appropriated the food 'with thanks', assenting to the impression that the food was 'from God'), he should not be shamed for his actions.[47] Since correct

---

[44] This person is not clearly labelled by Paul and some understand it to be a fellow believer, but it is difficult to understand why one who would censure such consumption would be at such a meal. The informant's description of the food as ἱερόθυτος rather than εἰδωλόθυτος supports the identification of an unbeliever and it is also most likely the host, an unbeliever, who would know the origin of the food. In favour of the identity of the informant as a fellow believer is Paul's use in 10.28 of μηνύω, which can have connotations of informing (in the sense of espionage). However, this could simply mean that the believer was previously unaware of this fact (due to avoiding evaluation as Paul had instructed).

[45] 10.29b–30 are difficult due to their unexpected tone and the uncertainty about how the two questions relate. The γάρ of 10.29b evidences a logical connection between the statement of 10.29a and 10.29b 'as though he were about to go on to explain further how another's conscience, not one's own, modifies behaviour in this case', per Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 486. Instead, Paul goes on to affirm the opposite, that one's behaviour is *not* based on the judgement of another's συνείδησις.

[46] Long and Sedley, *Hellenistic Philosophers,* vol. 1, 351; cf. Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 262.

[47] This reads βλασφημέω with the sense of 'speak ill', LSJ, s.v 'βλασφημέω', 2, and the shame it would entail. This possibility then would stand conceptually opposed to the boldness and freedom. Such a reading coincides

self-perception forms the basis for freedom, Paul refuses to be ashamed because he is persuaded that his self-perception is correct—like the Cynic in Epictetus' *Discourses*, his self-perception could be (and is elsewhere) the basis of boldness.

If Paul references the Stoic notion of self-perception, he assumes its role, in a descriptive sense, as a universal, permanent epistemological component (which explains its presence at all times, rather than only alongside wrongdoing). The continuous involvement of self-perception with all other impressions, impulses and actions explains the possibility of others' actions impacting it (not only one's own). Because it is a fundamental epistemological component, self-perception is inherently neutral in this descriptive sense and is authoritative in the sense that, as the basis of every action of an ethical agent, it functions authoritatively in that particular agent's ethical reasoning. Paul expresses this normative sense strongly in 10.30's assertion that his consumption of idol food should not be spoken ill of due to the fact that his gratitude expresses his self-perception, which is the basis for his freedom as an ethical agent. However, the continuous involvement of self-perception with all other impressions renders it fallible and susceptible to influence from assent to non-cataleptic impressions. This interaction with other impressions means that it has a tenuous but inevitable relationship to other norms (whether customs, teaching, etc.), and it must be informed by cataleptic impressions in order to develop correctly and function as the basis for proper ethical conduct. For one to live meaningfully 'to God', to find this affinity normative, the ethical agent must perceive of oneself as belonging 'to God' 'through Christ'. The ineliminable role of self-perception in epistemology, ethical reasoning and behaviour means that it is fundamental, to Paul's mind, for the believers' orientation to Christ: believers must, through correct assessment and a firm grasp of truth, reinforce their self-perception as those who belong 'to God' 'through Christ' in order to accurately assess their relationship to everything else around them.[48] Paul's construction of knowledge is shaped by his particular view of divine action as expressed in the theological frame of 8.1–3: the believers love God because they are known by him. Their growing self-perception as those belonging to God through Christ now determines what is most 'fitting' for them, including and transforming other aspects of their nature.

The role of self-perception as a basis of action in turn explains its ability to function as the grounds of boasting and boldness for Paul in 2 Cor 1.12, 4.2, and 5.11: he is persuaded that his self-perception as an apostle is correct and authoritative. Further, since self-perception interacts with and informs the assessment of all other impressions, one's behaviour can indicate, to some extent, the shape of one's self-perception. In other words, his actions are an expression of the relationship he perceives between himself and something else, so that actions can 'testify' to others or even the self (Rom 2.15; 9.1) about what is appropriate for oneself or the self-perception that one's actions express.[49]

---

with Paul's language in 9.15–18 which he is perhaps recapitulating in part here: Paul was concerned that he not be unduly influenced by others' opinions and lose his freedom to adapt as necessary in preaching the gospel and thereby be deprived of his boast. To follow the judgements of others rather than making selections based upon one's own self-perception is not freedom or grounds for boasting, but shameful and enslaving (cf. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, VII.122). The abstention Paul models for the Corinthians does not arise out of slavery to others' judgements but out of one's own self-perception as one belonging to God through Christ, which subsequently values others' progress towards the same self-perception.

[48] This is the sense in Rom 13.5, where the positioning of authorities as servants of God appeals to the believers' identity as those belonging to God; on the basis of this self-perception, submission to those who serve God is 'fitting' for them (not only because of the adverse consequences of disobedience).

[49] The self-perception of Jesus-believing gentiles 'testifies' to themselves of an 'unnatural' affinity with the law (Rom 2.15); cf. S. Gathercole, 'A Law unto Themselves: The Gentiles in Romans 2:14–15 Revisited', *JSNT* 85 (2002), 27–49.

Paul is not content merely to communicate correct information about the idols to the weak—that would not be 'knowledge'. Rather, he wants to shore up the weak aspects of their self-perception in relation to idols and vis-à-vis other things (such as their food). The weak realise they should not worship idols, but simply avoiding this action is not Paul's endgame. He wants to untangle the web of their self-perception in relation to idols and any other non-cataleptic impressions that prevent their grasp of the truth that they belong to God in 'all things'. In his instructions, Paul can afford some patience for differentiated epistemological and ethical development and, in his view of knowledge, there is allowance for differentiated behaviour based on particular natures. Each Jesus-believer, with their own constitution's traits, some shared and some particular, now has, via divine action, an affinity to God and Paul expects these traits to play a positive role in their ethical reasoning, so long as they do not conflict with the believer's orientation to Christ. As Cicero (or Panaetius) assessed activities and selections on the basis of one's particularities, Paul takes variations in sexuality and obligation into account in 1 Cor 7. In Chapter 9, he models a defence of action appropriate for him on the basis of his particular nature as an apostle. Paul expects the embodied experience of the Jesus-believers to be a determining factor in their ethical reasoning since self-perception forms one side of the relationship that every action would reflect and establish, both with God through Christ and, by extension, all else.

In conclusion, reading Paul's use of συνείδησις as self-perception within the structure of Stoic theory confirms some of scholarship's recent conclusions and explains some of the remaining puzzles surrounding his use and its relationship to wider discourse patterns. Paul views συνείδησις as a permanent epistemological component that continuously interacts with all other impressions, a feature which explains the possibility of others' actions impacting it (not only one's own wrongdoing). This interaction with other impressions means that it has a tenuous but inevitable relationship to other norms (whether customs, teaching, etc.), and it must be informed by cataleptic impressions in order to develop correctly and function as the basis for proper ethical conduct. Because it is an epistemological component, self-perception is inherently neutral in a descriptive sense and is normative in the sense that, as the basis of every action of an ethical agent, it functions authoritatively in that particular agent's ethical reasoning. For the Corinthians to live meaningfully 'to God', to find this affinity normative, they must perceive of themselves as belonging 'to God' 'through Christ' and they must, through correct assessment and a firm grasp of truth, reinforce this self-perception in order to accurately assess their relationship to everything else around them. Each Jesus-believer, with their own constitution's traits, now has, via divine action, an affinity to God, and Paul expects these traits and the embodied experience of the believers to play both positive and negative roles in their ethical reasoning. The ineliminable role of self-perception meant that it must be developed in light of God's action in Christ so that the Corinthians could 'do all things' 'to God' as those who belong to him 'through Christ'.