“Conscience Determines What’s Right” by Hubbard Winslow

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Hubbard Winslow (Holton, *Winslow Memorial*)[1]

About the author. . .

Hubbard Winslow (1799-1864) graduated Yale Theological Seminary and spent much of his life as a Presbyterian pastor. His most influential works include *Are You a Christian?*, *Intellectual Philosophy*, and *Moral Philosophy*. The *Historical Magazine* adjudged “in the province of philosophy he had few equals.”[2] *Intellectual Philosophy* was a popular 19th century textbook

1. David Parsons Holton and Frances Keturah Holton, *Winslow Memorial* (New York: Mrs. Frances K. Holton, Publisher, 1888), 2: 66.
2. John Ward Dean, *Historical Magazine* 7, no. 9 (Sept. 1864): 320.

wherein he surveys the history of philosophy and, as well, relates influential thinkers to Christian philosophy in an accessible manner.

About the work...

In his *Moral Philosophy; Analytical, Synthetical, and Practical*,[3] Winslow argues that basing ethics on theoretical philosophy is a "prevailing error." Metaphysics and logic, he argues, are not subservient to everyday consciousness of freedom and responsibility. In this reading, Winslow argues that philosophy should be used in the service of faith. He believes faith is a direct "manifestation of the truth" presented to each person's conscience and adduces just as "[w]e must not wait until we can philosophize upon food before we eat..." so also "[n]either should we wait to learn all the grounds and reasons of duty, before doing what we already know to be right."

From the reading...

"... the retributions of conscience are by no means always immediately consequent upon wrong doing. They are sometimes delayed, especially in the case of hardened transgressors, for months and for years. "

Ideas of Interest from *Moral Philosophy*

1. According to Winslow, what is "the exclusive dominion of conscience"?
2. How does Winslow characterize the two elements of conscience? How are these psychological elements related? How are they united?
3. Explain Winslow's definition of conscience.
4. What is the distinguishing faculty of conscience according to Winslow? What is the reason he gives that the pleasure of doing one's duty differs in kind from the pleasure of good company?
5. Discuss Winslow's three main functions of conscience.

3. Hubbard Winslow, *Moral Philosophy; Analytical, Synthetical, and Practical* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1856).

6. How does Winslow account for persons who do not immediately feel remorse when the have knowingly acted wrongly? Describe the "law of the operation of conscience." Does he presume all persons have a conscience?

The Reading Selection from *Moral Philosophy*

Conscience

Man alone of all creatures upon earth is capable of *moral* action. He alone realizes what is indicated by the word *ought*.. . .

The relation of the susceptibility of *conscience* to the perception of *moral* truth, is like that of the susceptibility of *taste* to the perception of *æsthetical* truth. Conscience quickens the rational spirit to discern between right and wrong, as the sensibility of taste quickens it to discern between beauty and deformity.

Our only intuitive perceptions with which the susceptibility of conscience is associated, are those which relate to *moral* truths. Other feeling attend other perceptions; here is the exclusive dominion of conscience.. . .

[C]onscience includes both the power of *perception*, and a susceptibility to a peculiar *feeling*. But the power of perception is always the same, to whatever truths it may be directed.. . . Thus conscience involves two psychological elements, the cognitive and the motive, affirmed in one and the same deliverance of the personal consciousness.

But while all the susceptibilities of the soul are dependent upon the intellect, there is one only, which, as united and coöperating with it, constitutes the distinguishing and sublime faculty of conscience. It is this which we are now to examine.

The Latin word *conscientia* and the Greek $\sigma\upsilon\nu\epsilon\iota\delta\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$, used in the Bible, denote an inward susceptibility to or realization of the mind's perceptions. Thus a man's intellect *perceives* the beauty of an object, and his susceptibility to the beautiful make him *realize* it. He thus not only *knows* it, but he *feels* it. The former is *speculative* knowledge; the latter is *experimental*. As both of these mental acts respect the same objective fact, the former is the *scientia* of it, the latter the *conscientia* of it. The one confirms the other.

Precisely thus a man's intellect *perceives*, and his conscience makes him *feel*, that is, it makes him *experimentally* know, the distinction between right and wrong.. . .

Conscience, then, including the power of perception, is man's *susceptibility to moral distinctions*. It is a faculty implanted in our mental constitution expressly to make us *feel* the distinction between moral truth and falsehood, and between right and wrong action, and thus to incite us to duty. It was not designed to go *before* reason, nor to act independently of it, to teach us which *is* true and right, but to be always strictly in its service.. . .

That which *distinguishes* the susceptibility of conscience from all other susceptibilities, is its exclusive interest in what pertains to the person's *own* conduct as *morally right or wrong*. It has nothing to do with the actions of others, nor yet those of one's self, except as they are related to his *personal duty*. In addition to this, the feeling of obligation, and the feeling of pleasure and of pain, which it imparts, are *unlike any other*. No other feeling is like that of moral obligation; no other *pain* is like that which arises from a consciousness of having *done wrong*; no other *pleasure* is like that which arises from a consciousness of having *done right*. It is not a difference in mere *degree*, but in *kind*. Our appeal here is to every man's experience.

Conscience Has Three Functions

Considered as a motive power, conscience is both passive and active; a susceptibility and an impulse. Besides prompting the rational spirit to *discern* between right and wrong, it has *three functions*, or, in other words, there are three ways in which it incites us to *do* right. It makes us feel that we *ought* to do so; it affords us a feeling of self-approval, when we *have* done so; it inflicts upon us a painful feeling of self-reproach, when we have *not* done so.

The first feeling is *prospective*. It is one that we have in view of something *to be* done. The last two are *retrospective*. They are feelings which we realize in view of something which we *have* done. The present moment is but a point; hence, all actions upon which we deliberate, must precede or follow the deliberation.. . .

First Function of Conscience

Conscience makes us feel that *we ought to do what we believe to be right.* In the same connection we may say, that it makes us feel that we ought *not* to do what we believe to be wrong. Both amount to the same thing; for, failing to do right, is doing wrong.

A boy sees tempting fruit in a neighbor's garden. He knows that it would be wrong to steal it. Now, whether we say, his conscience admonishes him that it is right to let it alone, or that it is wrong to steal it, our meaning is of course the same.

On returning from the bank, a man finds that the teller has accidentally counted to him a ten dollar note too much. We mean the same, whether we say, his conscience reminds him that he ought to return it, or, that it would be wrong not to do so.. . .

Second Function of Conscience

The second function of conscience is, to afford us a *delightful* feeling of self-approval when we have done what we believe to be right. This feeling is especially vivid, after a successful encounter with a strong and dangerous temptation to do wrong. When a severe struggle has been had, and a triumph has been won on the side of virtue, the feeling of satisfaction is peculiarly rich and delightful.

It is needless to attempt to analyze or to define this feeling. To know it, we must experience it. It was evidently designed to be a token of approbation from the Being who made us; a present reward of virtue, or rather, a foretaste of the richer reward awaiting it hereafter. It is a kind of first fruit of goodness. It was meant to encourage us to *persevere* in the conflict with temptation, and thus to strengthen and establish every right principle.. . .

Third Function of Conscience

The third function of conscience is, *to inflict upon us a peculiar painful feeling, when we have done what we believe to be wrong*. When the conscience is not seared, reflecting upon wrong conduct of which we have been guilty, is invariably attended with this feeling. It is termed *remorse*. It is designed, in part, as a present punishment for misdoing, or rather as an admonition of its guilt, and of the fearful ultimate consequences to which it tends. It is thus evidently meant to warn us against *repeating* the act.

It is useless to attempt a definition of remorse. Dictionaries define it, the keen pain or anguish excited by a sense of guilt. But as we have keen pain and anguish from other sources, this definition only refers us to its cause; thus leaving every person to learn, from his own experience, what the pain and anguish actually are.. . . As it cannot be defined, like every other primitive feeling, it can be known only as it is experienced.

Even the little child who disobeys his mother, or does other things which he knows to be wrong, has the painful feeling of a disturbed conscience. The young man rightly taught at home, who, when removed from parental watchfulness, begins to venture upon vicious indulgences, sometimes passes many a sleepless night in painful reflections upon his conduct.

It is important to observe, that the retributions of conscience are by no means always immediately consequent upon wrong doing. They are sometimes delayed, especially in the case of hardened transgressors, for months and for years.

The law of the operation of conscience seems to be this. In the early stages of transgression, its rebukes are prompt and earnest; but if these are disregarded, its sensibility gradually becomes less active, and, like the deep fires of a volcano when crusted over at the top, prepare for a tremendous outburst at a future time.

Thus the libertine, the thief, the defrauder, the murderer, has sometimes gone on for a series of years, realizing, especially during the latter part of his career, but feeble, if any, compunctions of conscience.

He is thus greatly emboldened in crime. "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed *speedily*, *therefore* the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil."[4]

Retribution at length overtakes the guilty man. Perhaps the civil arm arrests him, and places him in circumstances to reflect upon his ways. His feelings are at first mostly those of regret and chagrin. But conscience is at length aroused. His guilt now stares him in the face, and darts its fiery stings into his inmost spirit. Remorse, relentless and agonizing, makes him its prey, and drags him to the gates of despair.

From the reading…

"Retribution at length overtakes the guilty man. "

Let no one, then, who offends his conscience, hope to escape its retributions. They may be slow, but they are sure; and when they come, they will be all the more severe for the delay; for they will find greatly enhanced guilt. Sooner or later, they will certainly overtake him, and they will be in proportion to his crimes. But there will not have been made an even barter of pleasure for pain. Far, very far from it. All the pleasures of vice will prove at last to have been as nothing, compared with those merciless and bitter pangs, which an avenging and relentless conscience will justly inflict.

Such are the threefold functions of conscience, in accomplishing the great moral end for which it was given us. It is to our moral and religious interests what the desire of life is to our existence. The former would induce us to prize and protect character, as the latter would to prize and protect life. It is an original faculty. This susceptibility, as truly as the discerning intellect,

4. Eccl. 8: 11.

with all its fearful power to bless and to torment us, is a part of our mental constitution, and, like the soul itself, imperishable.

First Presbyterian Church, Geneva, NY and Bowdoin Street Church, Boston, MA—Churches Winslow served (*Sketches of Boston*; Illinois Post Card Co.)

Related Ideas

"Conscience,"[5] *Wikipedia*. Summaries of definitions, religious, secular, and philosophical views of conscience together with extensive references.

Douglas Langston. "Medieval Theories of Conscience."[6] *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. The use and philosophy of "conscience" and *synderesis*[7] by Bonaventura, Aquinas, Scotus, Ockham, and others. Links to other sources provided.

J. Rickaby, "Conscience,"[8]. *Catholic Encyclopedia*. An summary account of the definition, history, and philosophy of conscience from a religious point of view from New Advent.

W. R. Sorley, "Conscience."[9] *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*. An entry on "conscience" in James Mark Baldwin's 1901 dictionary online.

5. "Conscience" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conscience).
6. "Medieval Theories of Conscience" (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/conscience-medieval/).
7. *Synderesis* is the ability to act in accordance with our innate conscience's distinction of good from evil. *Eds.*
8. "Conscience" (http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04268a.htm).
9. "Conscience" (http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Baldwin/Dictionary/defs/C4defs.htm).

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Winslow states,"Man alone of all creatures upon earth is capable of *moral* action." Yet, any number of empirical studies have shown some animal behavior seems to suggest moral behavior:

   > A rat in a cage refused to push a lever for food when it sees that another rat receives an electric shock as a result. A male diana monkey who has learned to insert a token into a slot to obtain food helps a female who can't get the hang of the trick, inserting the token for her and allowing her to eat the food reward. A female fruit-eating bat helps an unrelated female give birth by showing her how to hang in the proper way.[10]

   Most likely the rules followed by animals living in a group limit fighting and encourage cooperative behavior. Even if we allow that the particular moral rules followed by animals are species specific, how would this state of affairs differ in kind from the fact that moral rules in different human societies vary?

2. Does Winslow make a "category mistake"[11] by supposing that the two psychological elements of conscience, feeling and perceiving, are presented as one to consciousness? Can a perception be a feeling or *vice versa* can a feeling be a perception? In psychiatric terms, an affect (i.e., a feeling) is defined as an "[e]motional feeling tone attached to an object, idea, or thought," and a perception is defined as a "mental process by which data—intellectual, sensory, and emotional— are organized meaningfully." [12]

3. Winslow argues just as "[w]e must not wait until we can philosophize upon food before we eat…" so also "[n]either should we wait to learn all the grounds and reasons of duty, before doing what we already know to be right." Compare Winslow's definition of conscience to Immanuel Kant's categorical and practical imperatives:

   > Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law. … Accordingly the practical imperative will be as follows: So act as to treat humanity … in every case as an end withall, never as a means.[13]

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10. Marc Bekoff and Jessica Pierce, *Wild Justice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), ix.
11. A category mistake is a confusion of logical types in definition or classification such as using colors to describe sounds.
12. Alfred M. Freedman, ed. *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry* (Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins Company, 1975), 2:2572, 2598.
13. Immanuel Kant, *Theory of Ethics* trans. Thomas Kingsmill Abbott (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, & Dyer, 1873), 67.

The categorical imperative implies not only consciousness of right and wrong but also implies the compelling motive of duty to act rightly. For both writers, conscience is not formed from experience or judging means to end but instead is implanted as a prior faculty of the soul.

4. Current theories in psychology of feeling and emotion differ, and these differences stem in large measure from consideration of the origin of specific emotions.With regard to moral feelings, do "moral distinctions depend entirely on certain peculiar sentiments of pain and pleasure" as determined through experience as Hume thought[14] or are they "an original moral predisposition" of the mind or an *a priori* "inner judge" as Kant thought[15]? What method or methods of inquiry could settle such a question? If we invoke Occam's razor,[16] which of these views would be more acceptable from the standpoint of simplicity? It might be worth noting that Aksan and Kochanska suggest that preschoolers have a differentiated organization of conscience which supports social learning theories closer to Hume's position, but toward the latter half of the preschool years a more uniform coherence of conscience tends to support the superego of psychoanalytic theory which is closer to Kant's.[17]
5. Do moral feelings differ in kind and not just degree from other kinds of feelings? If moral feelings differ in kind from other types of feelings, then what characteristics do moral feelings have that other kinds of feelings do not have? What are the radically different defining traits of moral feelings? Discuss how the difference in kind of moral feelings might be characterized from Winslow's point of view.
6. On what basis do you think Winslow concludes that conscience is eternal? How does conscience differ from soul on his view? If a person had no conscience, would that imply the person has no soul? How would Winslow account for the antisocial personality: "Persons with this disorder are incapable of significant loyalty to individuals, groups, or social values and are grossly selfish, callous, irresponsible, impulsive, and unable to feel guilt or to learn from experience and punishment."[18]

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14. David Hume, *A Treatise Concerning Human Understanding*, 1888 ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1968), 574.
15. Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 1797 ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 189.
16. Occam's razor states entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity and is often interpreted as implying the simplest explanation is the best. Colloquially in medicine, the view is sometimes expressed in Theodore Woodward's aphorism, "When you hear hoofbeats, don't expect to see Zebras." *Eds.*
17. Nazan Aksan and Brazyna Kochanska, "Conscience in Childhood: Old Questions, New Answers" in *Developmental Psychology* 41, No. 3 (2005): 506-516.
18. American Psychiatric Association, *A Psychiatric Glossary* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 116.

7. The *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* has no definition for "conscience" but in place of the a definition, a reference is given to the entity "ethics (Christianity)." Moreover, Michel Despland writes, "the notion of conscience as an internal organ is not found outside of Christianity."[19] How, then, do Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam establish a foundational basis for judging right and wrong?

8. To what extent would Winslow agree or disagree with the following legal characterization of "conscience"?

   > Every man of ordinary intelligence understand, in what ever other words he may express it, that conscience is that moral sense which dictates to him right and wrong. True, this sense differs in degree in individual members of society; but no reasonable being, whether controlled by it or not in his conduct, is wholly destitute of it. Miller v. Miller, 41 Atl. 277, 280, 187 Pa. 572[20]

   Is this judicial characterization sufficient to assure, as Winston suggests, that all persons agree on what actions are right and what actions are wrong?

9. Recent experiment results have indicated that sleep deprivation and the presence of magnetic fields affect moral judgment. Continuous wakefulness is disruptive to the ventromedial prefrontal region of the brain and results in extended response times for the evaluation of moral dilemmas.[21] When the right temporo-parietal junction of the brain is stimulated by a magnetic field, neuroscientists show moral judgments of another person's intention is impaired.[22] Can these studies be interpreted in such a way as to be consistent with Winslow's conception of conscience?

10. Discuss how you think Winslow would respond to Nietzsche's objection that not all persons feel retributions of conscience, whereas Winslow concludes in our reading, "Let no one, then, who offends his conscience, hope to escape its retributions." Nietzsche writes:

    > Let us, above all, not undervalue the measure in which, just by the spectacle of the legal procedure and punishment, the criminal will be prevented from feeling his own deed, the kind of action he did, to be *as such* objectionable; for he sees precisely the same kinds of actions performed, and approved

19. Michael Despland, in *Encyclopædia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 45.
20. Editorial Staff of the National Reporter System, *Judicial and Statutory Definitions of Words and Phrases* (St. Paul: West Publishing Company, 1904), 1: 1436.
21. William D. S. Killgore, et. al, "The Effects of 53 Hours of Sleep Deprivation on Moral Judgment," *Sleep* 30, no. 3 (March, 2007): 345-352.
22. Rebecca Saxe, et. al, "Disruption of the right temporo-parietal junction with transcranial magnetic stimulation reduces the role of beliefs in moral judgments," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* Vol. 107, 15 (April 13, 2010): 6753-6758.

> of, done with good conscience, in the service of justice, such as espionage, outwitting, bribery, trap-setting . . . [23]

Such victims, Nietzsche concludes, suffer no "inner pains" other than the pain of the punishment itself.

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Revision History

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23. Friedrich Nietzsche, *A Genealogy of Morals*, trans. William A Hausemann in *The Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Alexander Tille (New York: Macmillan: 1897), 10: 102.