

CONSCIENCE IN
MEDIÉVAL PHILOSOPHY

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I

Peter Lombard and Jerome

Conscience has been much neglected by philosophers. It is not directly treated in ancient philosophy, while, apart from Bishop Butler, who was primarily interested in the aspect of self-deception, there is scarcely a philosopher from Descartes to the present day who has touched upon it more than tangentially. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, however, a treatise upon conscience became a standard component of commentaries upon Peter Lombard's *Judgements* and from there found its way into university seminars (written up as *Debated Questions*) and textbooks (*Summae*). The history of this development up to Henry of Ghent has been ably documented by Lottin (1948). Lottin, though, was writing for specialists in medieval philosophy and from within the tradition of the 'Gothic revival' of clerical culture, with the result that his work is not easily accessible, psychologically, to contemporary philosophers who are the intellectual heirs of Hume, Kant and, now, of Frege. My purpose is therefore to draw upon Lottin's researches in order to interpret the later medieval discussion of conscience to philosophers more closely acquainted with the subsequent development of their discipline, in the belief that the medieval contribution opened up questions which are still worth pursuing. Indeed, there has been a tendency of late towards a gap between the philosophy of mind and ethics, even to the extent that one group of philosophers has concentrated upon philosophical logic and the philosophy of mind, while a different group has concentrated upon ethics and political and social philosophy. Conscience lies within this gap: it is not obvious, off-hand, whether it is a topic in the philosophy of mind or an ethical topic, so reflection upon it may serve, apart from its intrinsic interest, to bring together again what has been sundered.

Yet the way in which conscience became a standard topic of later medieval philosophy was curious, almost an accident, while the classificatory scheme within which it was treated is so different from that of more recent philosophy as to demand a preliminary reorientation if the point of the questions which medieval authors posed is to be appreciated

today. One would expect to find that the motivation for raising questions about conscience was theological and that it came into European thought from Hebrew sources; yet both the term and the topic (except at a superficial level) are Hellenistic in origin. So far as the former is concerned,

The term 'conscience' (*συνείδησις*) is to be understood in conjunction with a number of similar words and phrases, which are sometimes used interchangeably. These are τὸ συνειδότητος, τὸ συνειδός, συνέσις, αὐτῷ συνιστορεῖν τι, αὐτῷ συνειδέναι τι. All these stem from the verb σύννοια, which means 'I know in common with'. It usually implies knowledge about another person, which can be used in witness for or against him. Hence σύννοια came to mean 'I bear witness'. Of particular importance is the phrase αὐτῷ συνειδένα τι, which means 'to share knowledge with oneself', 'to know with oneself', 'to be a witness for or against oneself', because *συνείδησις* (like τὸ συνειδός and συνέσις) is its substantial equivalent. The necessity for finding a single substantive to convey the meaning of a phrase would be natural (Davies, 1962, p. 672).

The Latin '*conscientia*' is thus an exact transliteration of '*syneidesis*'. It was much more popular in ancient Latin writers than '*syneidesis*' among ancient Greek authors, both Cicero and Seneca connecting it with Epicureanism (Davies, *ibid.*). Whether in its Greek or in its Latin form, however, the term has a *range* of meanings, only part of which is preserved by 'conscience' as it is now used in modern English. (I am indebted, in what follows, to Lewis 1967, though his account must be read critically and with caution.) In its weakest sense, the prefix ('*syn-*', '*con-*' = 'with') does not modify the meaning of the noun to which it is attached, so that it is merely a synonym for 'knowledge'. It is from this sense that the modern English 'consciousness' has developed, together with the adjective 'conscious' which is often a synonym for 'aware', as in 'I'm fully conscious that . . .'. Where the prefix does modify the meaning of the noun, the original sense is that of knowing something (in company) with someone else. Since it would be rather pointless to insist upon the shared aspect of the knowledge where its object was public anyway, it was used primarily in cases where one person was privy to another's secret, and this carried two further implications. The first is that, in being privy to another's secret, I am in a position to *witness* to what he knows. The second (not always fulfilled) is that a man is ashamed of what he keeps secret, so that my witness, if I choose to give it, will be against him rather than to his credit.

The modern English sense of 'conscience' derives from this by two stages. Stage one is reflexivisation: being privy to one's *own* secret. This notion has obvious difficulties: if a man knows something, can he fail

to know that he knows it? There is an everyday case which suggests that he can. Sometimes a person, when asked a certain question, replies 'I don't know', but then, after further questioning, comes out with the answer, so that we say to him: 'You see, you really knew all the time.' He had temporarily forgotten the answer, but not to the extent of being totally unable to recall it: he just needed some prompting. This is part of what is involved in examining one's conscience: you go over the events of a previous period in order to call to mind what you did or failed to do, and often remember thereby a number of things which you had temporarily forgotten. The exercise is necessary because, if they are things of which we are ashamed, it is highly convenient to forget them.

On closer scrutiny, though, this turns out to be more than a mere reflexivisation of being privy to *another's* secret. A case of the latter could be described by a sentence obtained from the schema:

(S1) *A* knows that *B* knows that *p*

where 'know' bears the same sense in *both* occurrences. It could be purely dispositional, even to the extent that *B* had temporarily forgotten that *p* and that *A* had temporarily forgotten that *B* knew that *p*. We can imagine circumstances in which we said to *A*: 'You see, you really knew all the time that *B* knew that *p*'. This is not possible in the reflexive case, which can be described by sentences derived from the schema:

(S2) *A* knows that he himself knows that *p*.

If *A* has temporarily forgotten that *p*, then (S2) will be false. So the first occurrence of 'know' must mean 'is aware that', though, of course, *A* need not actually be thinking of what he knows about for it to be true (cf. Hintikka 1962, pp. 103–125). The reflexivisation of (S1) to yield (S2) thus involves a restriction of the meaning of the first occurrence of 'know', such that (S2) has the same truth-conditions as '*A* is aware that he knows that *p*' or '*A* is conscious that he knows that *p*'. Otherwise, the consequence holds that

(C1) *A* knows that *p* \vDash *A* knows that he knows that *p*

and, since the converse is merely a special case of

(C2) *A* knows that *p* \vDash *p*

(with '*A* knows that *p*' substituted for '*p*'), (S2) is equivalent to '*A* knows that *p*'. Thus the weak sense of '*conscientia*' must be imported in

order to drive a wedge between merely knowing that p , and knowing that one knows that p .

A person who has successfully examined his conscience is then in a position to *witness* as to what he did or failed to do; customarily, however, he will also *judge* his actions or omissions as right or wrong in the circumstances, by measuring them against his standards of behaviour. If they meet these standards, we say that he has a 'good conscience', if not, that he has a 'bad conscience' (and then he normally feels guilty). Logically, there is a transition from being witness to being judge but, psychologically, recall and judgement are often simultaneous. Because of this, the second stage in the development of the meaning of 'conscience' has been its application to a person's standards of behaviour, and this is now the central sense in modern English. In order to understand the medieval discussion of conscience, this development must be borne in mind. In particular, we need to ask whether the final stage has broken the original connection between conscience and knowledge: people's standards of behaviour differ, so are they not a matter of belief rather than of knowledge? As a first attempt at explaining what we mean by 'conscience' today, we might well say that it is the set of beliefs held by a person, say A , which can be reported in the form:

S3) A believes that he ought to ϕ ,

where any verb of action, or corresponding verb-phrase (which may include a sign of negation), may be substituted for ' ϕ '. Borrowing from the branch of modal logic which treats of what is obligatory, forbidden or permitted, I shall call a belief which can be reported in this form a *deontic* belief. If, however, the connection of conscience with knowledge is to be sustained, the relevant schema will be

(S4) A knows that he ought to ϕ ,

and this entails, where (S3) does not, ' A ought to ϕ '. In this case, I shall speak of 'deontic knowledge'.

Even in speaking of deontic belief, I am assuming that sentences obtained from the schema ' A ought to ϕ ' can be either true or false. This has been challenged by some philosophers, but is taken for granted by medieval authors. *Prima facie*, the assumption appears to be well-founded: to believe something is to believe that it is *true*, so schema (S3) would be semantically ill-formed if no sentence obtainable from the schema ' A ought to ϕ ' had a truth-value. Yet it is a matter of everyday experience that people *do* hold beliefs about what they ought to do, and it is difficult to see how any investigation of conscience would be pos-

sible if this were not so. In particular, how could we raise the question, of interest alike to medieval and to contemporary philosophers, whether a man is always obliged to follow his conscience? – for this is equivalent to asking whether there is a valid consequence from schema (S₃) or from schema (S₄), according to the account of conscience which one adopts, to ‘*A* ought to ϕ ’.

But this is to anticipate, for the majority of medieval discussions of conscience are to be found in commentaries on Peter Lombard’s *Judgements* 2.39, where the question is not directly about conscience at all but, rather, how the will can be bad. As usual, Peter Lombard reports several answers, though, exceptionally, he does not pronounce judgement upon them at the end. He notes, first (1.3) that some people distinguish two senses of ‘will’ (*voluntas*), in one of which it is a power, in the other the exercise of that power. This, of course, is Aristotle’s distinction between potentiality and actualisation, but a new application of it. If the will is represented in propositions whose main verb is ‘want’, i.e. in those obtainable from the schema

(S₅) *A* wants to ϕ ,

then it would appear always to be dispositional: such a proposition can be true even when *A* is fully engaged in activities which have nothing to do with the desire which it reports. Moreover, the most natural way of construing ‘exercise of the will’ would be as describing any action intended to secure the fulfilment of the desire in question, where such action would not normally itself consist in willing or wanting. This seems to have been Aristotle’s own view, since he says that the conclusion of a piece of practical reasoning is an action (*De motu animalium* 6, 70^aIII–20).

The distinction which Peter Lombard reports, however, was more probably inspired by a passage in which Aristotle distinguishes between two senses of ‘know’, the first dispositional, but the second actually thinking about what one knows, as is sometimes necessary when using one’s knowledge (*De anima* 3.4, 429^a29 ff.). Similarly, we each have a host of desires, but it is only at certain times that any one of them makes itself felt or that we pay attention to it, so that it is then actualised in the sense of being called to mind. The problem which Peter Lombard sets out requires this interpretation, for, he continues, the will is part of man’s natural endowment, and he rejects the solution that *qua* potentiality it is always good but *qua* actualisation sometimes bad, on the ground that there is nothing wrong with calling to mind what one knows, so

why should there be anything wrong with calling to mind what one wants? He admits, though, that there may be some occasions when it may be bad to call to mind what we know: 'For now and again a person remembers something bad in order to do it, and seeks to understand the truth in order to attack it' (2.1).

Yet these are exceptional, rather than typical cases, whereas evil desires are commonplace, and this leads him on to the famous passage in Romans 7 where St Paul describes his own internal conflicts: 'For I do not do what I want, but do what I do not want' (v. 15). Are there, then, asks Peter Lombard, two wills in man? Those who say 'Yes' fall into two camps. The first group holds that the will by which a man wants to do what is good in such a conflict is the will with which he is naturally endowed; it is the spark of conscience which, as Jerome said, was not even extinguished in Cain, whereas the other will is a result of the Fall of Adam. The second group takes the opposite view: the will by which a man wants to do what is bad is embraced by free choice and is in the ascendant unless and until God's grace gives greater strength to the will that wants to do what is good. Finally, there are those who maintain that there is only one will in man, by which he 'naturally wants what is good and through a defect in it wants and takes pleasure in what is evil; so that, to the extent that it wants what is good, it is naturally good but, to the extent that it wants what is bad, it is evil' (3.4). Peter Lombard concludes by remarking that the question whether there are two wills in man is a deep one, leaving it to his successors to decide between the three solutions.

Conscience is thus no more than mentioned by Peter Lombard, and then only with the reference to Jerome in his report of the first opinion. It arises, moreover, in the context of a conflict of desires. Subsequent writers followed up the reference to Jerome, which is to the beginning of his *Commentary on Ezekiel* (see Translations, pp. 79–80). It makes a much more explicit connection between conscience and Plato's (rather than St Paul's) discussion of conflicting desires, and consists of an allegorical interpretation of the four animals in Ezekiel's vision (Ezekiel 1:4–14), which gave Jerome's medieval readers many headaches. They were not worried by his exegesis: the text of Ezekiel and its meaning plays no further part in the discussion. In his vision, Ezekiel saw four living creatures coming out of a fiery cloud. Each of them had the form of a man, but with four faces; the front face was human, the right face that of a lion, the left that of an ox, and the back face that of an eagle. Jerome interprets the four faces as representing the structure of the

human soul, correlating the first three faces with Plato's tripartite division in the *Republic* (4, 436B-441B). Peter Lombard's citation of Jerome is thus very apposite, for Plato invokes the tripartite division precisely to explain a conflict of desires. We must now go into this in more detail, as it is closely relevant to the medieval discussion.

Plato's argument proceeds in three stages. First, he establishes with the aid of an example that 'the same thing will never do or undergo opposites in the same respect in relation to the same thing and at the same time; so if we meet these contradictions, we shall know that it was not the same thing, but a plurality'. Thus, if a man who is standing still moves his hands and head, we cannot properly say that he is simultaneously at rest and in motion, but only that a part of him is at rest and a part in motion. Second, he applies this principle to desire and aversion: people who are thirsty are sometimes nevertheless unwilling to drink (as a modern example, take the alcoholic to whom apomorphine has been administered; he has a desire for a drink but, simultaneously, an aversion to it, because he knows that it will have an extremely unpleasant effect - vomiting, etc.). In this example, both the desire and the aversion have the same object, so Plato concludes that they must have different subjects. There is no room for distinguishing different parts of the alcoholic's body for this purpose and, hence, we must posit different parts of his soul. His aversion to the liquor is rational, so its subject must be the rational part of the soul, whereas his desire for it is non-rational, a kind of appetite; its subject can therefore be assigned as the appetitive part.

In the final stage of his argument, Plato introduces the story of Leontios to show that a third part of the soul must also be admitted:

Leontios . . . , on his way up from Piraeus under the outer side of the northern wall, becoming aware of dead bodies that lay at the place of execution, simultaneously felt a desire to see them and a repugnance and aversion, and . . . for a time he resisted and veiled his head, but overpowered in despite of all by his desire, rushed up to the corpses, opening his eyes wide and yelling at them: 'There you are, curse you! Take your fill of the splendid sight.'

Leontios is angry with himself for yielding to his desire; but isn't this anger just a manifestation of his rational aversion to the deed? 'No', replies Plato, because small children, in whom reason has not yet developed, throw tantrums when their appetites are frustrated, so anger (and, more generally, the emotions) can sometimes side with reason, sometimes with appetite. Hence we must posit an emotive part of the soul in addition to the rational and appetitive.

The doctrine of the tripartite soul was not inherited by the middle ages in its pure form, but in the modified version adopted by Aristotle. Aristotle had considerable hesitation, in the *De anima*, about speaking of 'parts' of the soul; he discusses this terminology several times, rather inconclusively, but prefers on the whole to apply his potentiality/actualisation distinction here instead and to regard the soul as having rational, appetitive and emotional potentialities rather than parts. They are nevertheless conceived as basic and mutually irreducible psychological potentialities and thus preserve the Platonic idea of the human soul as having a structure. Little then hangs upon the use of 'part': a structure consists of inter-related parts, but the parts can be of any logical type, so Aristotle is merely taking Plato's analysis one step further and specifying parts of the soul as potentialities.

It is common today for the tripartite soul to be rejected by philosophers, but Plato's argument is more difficult to evade than may at first sight appear, and it has exerted a very far-reaching influence upon European thought. Moreover, it is this framework which presented medieval philosophers with their central problem about conscience, for Jerome's suggestion is that the soul has a quadripartite structure, with conscience as a fourth potentiality irreducible to any of the other three. Yet one possible interpretation of the Leontios story is that he had a bad conscience about looking at the corpses, his subsequent anger with himself being a manifestation of guilt. More generally, chronic conflicts of desires are typically cases of wanting to do something but believing (or, perhaps, knowing) that one ought not to do it. So is not conscience an aspect of reason, rather than a distinct potentiality? Yet, on the other hand, it also seems to involve the emotions: a person who acts against his conscience normally feels guilty.

These are the initial problems which medieval philosophers saw in Peter Lombard and Jerome, but they are not the first questions about conscience which a modern philosopher would ask. Still, I think that the medieval approach can be justified. Plato, it may be objected, failed to notice that 'want' may be followed by a second verb, and that, even in sentences in which a second verb does not appear, one can be understood as implicitly present. In his own examples, the second verb is explicit: thus the correct description of the man who has conflicting desires about drinking is that he both wants to drink and wants not to drink. Nor is this description overtly contradictory: the 'not' qualifies 'to drink'; it does not qualify 'want'. Certainly the man cannot fulfil both desires simultaneously, but he can have them without thereby

forcing us to admit a different subject for each desire. But anyone who takes this view must also deny that

(C₃) *A* wants not to ϕ \equiv *A* does not want to ϕ

is a valid consequence, since, otherwise, we can immediately obtain a contradiction from the original description. And if this case is the only reason he can give for denying its validity, then his resort will be suspect. It would be an even feebler solution to say that the sense of 'want' in which the man wants to drink is different from that in which he wants not to drink, for, if that were so, why should he feel any internal conflict between the two desires? The second stage of Plato's argument thus survives the necessary correction that in '*A* wants not to ϕ ', 'want' does not fall within the scope of 'not'.

We find no problem in regarding the human body as having a structure. Moreover, we cannot ascribe to human beings *qua* bodies the full range of qualities which we *do* ascribe to them. A man may kick a ball with his foot or lift a glass to his lips with his hand, but with what part of his body is he mean or witty, stupid or lazy? We regard human beings as persons, too, and it would surely be surprising if human personality, which we understand so much worse than human bodies, did not also have a structure. Psychiatrists and psychologists, at any rate, find the assumption necessary. Perhaps the former here have been influenced by ancient and medieval ways of thought; we know, for example, that Freud attended a course of lectures on Aristotle in Vienna, and the elements of his 'tripartite soul' are evidently related to three of Jerome's four: the 'I' to reason, the 'It' to appetite and the 'Super-I' to conscience. But the same charge cannot be brought against a psychologist like Cattell, who has used factor analysis in order to isolate and identify basic personality traits which, upon inspection, appear very close to potentialities. The medieval preoccupation with psychological topology is thus not, after all, so alien to modern thought, and we do not have to commit ourselves to a particular classification of basic potentialities in order to profit from their discussions: indeed, within limits, they differ among themselves about the best classification.

Jerome also raises the question whether a person can cease to have a conscience. This is still topical (cf. Ryle, 1958) but, today, it would probably be discussed in conjunction with the related question whether a person can fail to acquire a conscience. The latter is a blind spot of medieval philosophers; they lacked our notion of psychopathic personality and it did not occur to them that conscience might be

environmentally determined by parents, education and society. This is perhaps the greatest weakness of the medieval discussion, but it is understandable in a society which did not manifest the variety of deontic belief commonly encountered today and in which there was little communication with and knowledge of other cultural traditions. In spite of this, their answers to Jerome's question led them eventually to issues which lie at the heart of the topic. For Jerome's own answer is, *prima facie*, inconsistent.

First, he tells us that even Cain did not cease to have a conscience, a rather surprising remark in view of the story of Cain and Abel, for at no point in the story does Cain show the slightest sign of being sorry for having murdered his brother. When the Lord asks him, 'Where is Abel your brother?', he tries to disown any responsibility: 'I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?' (Genesis 4:9). Subsequently, after being sentenced to a nomadic life, he merely complains: 'My punishment is greater than I can bear' (Genesis 4:13). However, Jerome then goes on to say that very wicked people *do* cease to have any conscience, quoting other passages of Scripture in support.

Medieval philosophers thought they could resolve this inconsistency. Jerome introduces the example of Cain in apposition to '*synteresin*', 'that spark of conscience which was not even extinguished in the breast of Cain . . . and by which we discern that we sin'. Now '*synteresin*' could be a corruption of '*syneidesis*', but there is also a late (and rather rare) Greek word '*συντήρησις*', of which it is an exact Latin transliteration. This is a compound of '*τηρέω*', which means 'watch over', 'heed' or 'observe'. '*Synteresis*' most commonly means 'preservation' or 'maintenance', as e.g. in God's conservation of his creation. But the '*syn-*' prefix can also have reflexive force, which gives it the sense of observing or watching over oneself and, perhaps, thereby preserving oneself from wrongdoing. Jerome's quotation from 1 Corinthians suggests that this is how he understood it, for the verb which St Paul used in that passage was '*tereo*' ('keep sound' in the translation). Yet Jerome goes on to say that 'this conscience is cast down among some people . . . and loses its place'. This suggested to medieval philosophers that a distinction should be drawn between *synderesis* (Greek '*ντ*' is pronounced 'nd') and conscience, *synderesis* being the 'spark of conscience' rather than conscience proper. Thus, they note that, even when a person does not feel guilty about having done something which is wrong, he may still regret the consequences, e.g. a punishment inflicted upon him on that account, and to that extent regret having done it.

This residue of regret is then regarded as the 'spark of conscience', which can plausibly be attributed even to Cain, since he complains about his punishment.

There thus grew up two treatises, one on *synderesis* and the other on *conscientia*, the two notions being so expounded that *synderesis* cannot be lost but *conscientia* can. To medieval philosophers, this would have seemed an honest attempt to make sense of a puzzling passage in Jerome, although, as exegesis, it will hardly convince a modern reader. For when Jerome says that *this* conscience loses its place in some people, he must be referring to its place in the quadripartite structure of the soul, where the fourth part is said to be *synteresis*. It is, admittedly, curious that he used '*synteresis*' in preference to '*syneidesis*', since he would have known that the latter was the exact equivalent of the Latin '*conscientia*'. But he is reporting the views of others (of which no independent record survives), so he would have felt obliged to use their terminology, while indicating by his remark about conscience losing its place that he supposed them to mean 'conscience' by '*synteresis*'. His comment upon Cain would then have to be construed: '*synteresis*, i.e. conscience, of which some spark was left even in the breast of Cain . . .'. He may well, indeed, have been attributing Cain's remorse on account of the consequences of his action to a residue of conscience, but it is also debatable whether this attribution is correct. A man might, for example, be unjustly punished for something which he did, and regret having done it because of the consequences, even though he neither feels guilty about what he has done nor has any reason to do so. In this case, his regret has nothing whatever to do with conscience.

Disagreement with the medieval interpretation of Jerome does not necessarily force us, though, to write off the distinction between *synderesis* and conscience as an unfortunate mistake. There could be independent reasons for drawing a distinction *within* what we simply call 'conscience' – never mind the labels for it – and the right question to ask is whether the medieval distinction, in spite of its muddled origin, turned out to be productive. Do the two terms mark a distinction which is essential for understanding and speaking clearly about the notion of conscience? If so, then the original motivation for its introduction need not trouble us further.