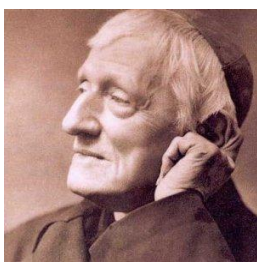


## Assess the view that conscience is not the voice of God, but is learned. [45]

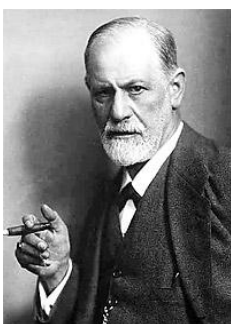


Jean Piaget put forward this idea. He was a developmental psychologist who studied the behaviour of children. He theorised that children go through different stages in their understanding of the world around them, and it is not until the age of 10 that young people have a fully developed sense of morality. This scientific approach is very plausible because it is based on observations, and makes predictions that can be tested. For example, you can describe two different situations to a six year old, one of which is someone lying and a minor bad consequence arising, the other is someone accidentally causing a very negative consequence. For a six year old, the latter case would 'make mummy more cross' because their understanding is that something is bad because it hurts or upsets people. Ask an older child, and they will accurately say that a parent would be more cross with the child who told a lie. Piaget is showing that conscience is something we learn as we grow and develop.

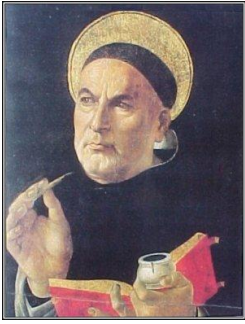


This theory seems to contradict Newman's ideas. Newman was an intuitionist, believing that conscience is 'the voice of God'. He believed that when faced with a moral decision, we get a sense of moral direction from God, which we can either listen to or ignore. Conscience is an ability to detect the right course of action. For Newman, following the conscience was more important than listening to the teachings of the Pope. In this way, we do not learn what is right or wrong from our parents or from religious leaders or scriptures. Conscience is a law that speaks to the human heart, a law written by God.

Piaget's view may seem more accurate, as it is possible to observe and test it. However, many people don't like the implications of accepting this view. Piaget is not claiming that there is any moral truth – he does not believe in objective morality or absolute rules. Whilst a person might develop respect for others whichever society they are brought up in, other aspects of morality will vary according to your upbringing. For example, it is natural for men to masturbate, yet some men feel guilty afterwards. The percentage of people who feel guilty is higher in Christian households. For many Christians, there are absolute moral rules. Catholics would argue that feeling guilt is a sign from God that you have done something wrong. When challenged to explain how children develop, a follower of Newman might claim that a younger child cannot sense God's direction clearly, and it is our ability to 'hear God's voice' that develops as we grow.

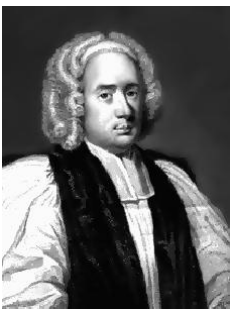


Freud was a strong critic of religion. The 'guilt' which people feel is merely a result of events in our childhood and the disapproval of society. This explains why different societies have different values. In Islam, a man may marry four wives – this idea would be repugnant to many Christians. For Freud, the superego exists in our subconscious and reflects negative experiences, and in a healthy person the ego, our conscious personality, is in control and overrides the guilty conscience. For Freud, conscience isn't taught as such, it develops subconsciously. Many people criticise this view of the conscience. It is very negative, yet our conscience can be useful in preventing us from doing things that harm ourselves or others. Many psychologists agree with Freud that conscience develops subconsciously, but reject the idea of the conscience as an entirely negative thing.



Aquinas had a very different view of the conscience, and would have totally rejected Freud's notion of a negative subconscious 'superego'. He was not an intuitionist, and would not have agreed with the idea of conscience as the 'voice of God'. Instead, he believed we have a God-given faculty of reason. Humans are inclined to do good and avoid evil. He called this 'Synderesis'. In a way, then, this is the antithesis of Freud – a positive, subconscious will to do what is right. With this subconscious ability, we can grasp the basic purposes of human life – to survive, develop, reproduce, learn, worship God, live in a civilised society etc. For Aquinas, the first part of the conscience was this subconscious grasp of the Primary Precepts. The next part of the conscience was what he called 'conscientia', which is the rational ability to distinguish between different courses of action. So, conscience is far from being 'the voice of God', but neither is it learnt. We may learn to use our moral judgement more effectively, but conscience is the 'dictate of reason'. Conscience is a God given ability, not something learnt and not the 'voice of God'.

Critics of Aquinas say that if he was right, we would all reach the same conclusions about what is right or wrong. For example, we would all agree about whether it is right for two men to get married. However, people disagree strongly about this question. For many Christians, they believe that our ideas of right and wrong should come from the Bible, which they may believe is the word of God. Conscience for them is something learnt. Others believe that being Christian means having an indwelling of the Holy Spirit. They may believe that God's Spirit living inside us is the voice of God.



Butler believed that Aquinas was right to see reason as supreme. He agreed that our conscience should have ultimate authority over our actions. If conscience were something learnt, if it was taught to us, then where would its authority come from? People's consciences would develop differently according to where they live and how they were brought up. Butler would have been much happier thinking of conscience as the voice of God. His position was much closer to Aquinas'. He saw conscience as 'our natural guide, the guide assigned to us by the Author of our nature'. For Butler, our natural instincts are to look after ourselves. We also have a desire to help others, and it is the conscience's job to weigh up these two opposing interests of self-love and benevolence.

So, for Butler we have a God-given ability to judge what is right or wrong, similar to Newman's voice of God, but rather than being a voice it is a faculty to reason, a lot like Aquinas. For all three, seeing conscience as coming 'from God' gives conscience a supreme authority over our actions. This allows for objective morality, for universal principles that all people should follow. This could lead to belief in universal human rights, a rejection of torture and arbitrary arrest, important ideas in the current discussions around the ethics of war. If the conscience were merely taught, there would be no source of moral authority, no objective standard by which to make declarations about inalienable rights.



Fromm had a theory of the conscience that was similar to Freud's, an authoritarian conscience that made us do things as a result of guilt or the fear of displeasing others. This sort of 'learnt conscience' should not have authority over us, because it is as likely to lead us to do wrong (as with those in Nazi Germany which Fromm experience directly) as it is to do right. The religious responses look preferable to this. However, Fromm developed the idea of a humanistic conscience. This is a healthier perspective, allowing us to reflect on our behaviour and become better people. Those people who find it hard to accept that conscience comes from God may prefer this view of the conscience, not as something learnt, but as an ability to reflect on our own values and behaviour and to develop virtues.