

The Human Conscience as a Determinant of Morality: It's Implication for the Nigerian Society

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Abstract

Human conscience has been severally described as the judge of human morality in every society. The way individuals in the Nigerian Society behave is predicated on the type of conscience they possess. Human conscience is that part of one's mind that tells one whether his or her actions are right or wrong. Conscience varies from certain, doubtful, and perplexed, scrupulous to lax conscience. The good conscience undoubtedly implies the absence of fault, constant practice of good works and insistence on honorable behavior. This paper, therefore, seeks to survey types and they directly correlate with our different actions in the Nigerian Society today. This paper adopts descriptive method in order to achieve its objectives.

1. Preamble

"Conscience is seen by some scholars as the source of moral knowledge or the source of moral reason, while others see it merely as a name for more feelings approval or disapproval of actions either as a result of psychological or social conditioning."¹ (Peschke K.H. Christian Ethics, moral Theology in the light of Vat. 2 Vol. 1 1986 p. 152.)

This view is held by various scholars especially by both philosophers and non-philosophers. It praises us where we do something right and disapproves when we go wrong or so something wrong. This paper aims at a general over view of human conscience, its importance to man's life especially in Nigerian society where some do not follow the moral norms.

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The failure of this observance of moral norms leads to bribery and corruption, killing and other vices without a second thought. For clarity of thought we shall first examine its origin and development.

But be that as it may, the term conscience remains an in-eligible factor in human life and moral estimation.

The experience and knowledge of the Holy Scriptures confirms the idea that there is a voice in man which demands of him to do the known good and which blames him if he refuses to do or obey. We must note therefore that no culture has yet be found that does not recognize the experience of conscience.

An Egyptian writer confirms this when he said; *"The heart is an excellent writer and one must not transgress against its words."*² (Peschke K.H. Christian Ethics, moral Theology in the light of Vat. 2 Vol. 1 1986 Ibid. P. 152)

For effective presentation this paper is divided into five parts; the basic concept on conscience both from philosophy and Theologians view point with particular attention paid to Human conscience in Deuteronomic history and the New Testament views, problems associated with conscience, delve into conscience as a determinant of morality; its implication for the Nigerian people.

2. Notion and Definition

Conscience is that term or one of the terms that suffers over familiarity. The term conscience comes from the *latin* word "*conscientia*" which is translated into two distinct ways in English as conscience or as consciousness. This dual meaning of "*conscientia*" evolved gradually in English as we came to reserve "*conscience*" for moral sphere, whereas consciousness was used in the immoral field of awareness.

It was on this note that St. Anslem defined conscience as

*The pressure within man of all that has not yet existed but pleads for existence of all conscience and reason to enhance those conditions which develop a nostalgia for the good and bring about its realisation*³ (D.C. Maguire Moral choice 1978 p.371)

Conscience can also be said to mean “knowing with or interior knowledge ending in judgement. *“Conscience is seen as that part of your mind that tells you whether your actions are right or wrong”⁴ (Ibid p.371)* The Hebrew as well as Greek language has no word for conscience. But prior to the emergence of technical term, this language ordinarily expressed in the idea of conscience by the word heart. The Holy Scripture puts it better when it says “o that today you would listen to his voice harden not your heart as at Meribah.” (Ps. 94: 7-8)

Having seen so far what conscience is, we shall now examine some views on conscience beginning from the philosophers, theologians, history and as well as the Old and New Testament.

3. Problem - Origin and Development

Scholarship has pondered and wondered where conscience derives its criteria of judgement. On what basis does our moral conscience judge the action we are about to carry out or have been carried out? The query above has a preliminary response from the second Vatican council. Thus

The highest norm of human life is the divine law itself eternal, objective and universal, by which God orders, directs and governs the whole world and the way of human community... It is through his conscience that man sees and recognizes the demands of the divine law. He is bound to follow this conscience faithfully in all his activity so that he may come to God, who is his last end⁵ (Vatican 2 council... Gadium et spes Vol. 2)

Conscience is the secret care and sanctuary of a man. The development of the conscience is done as a child⁶ (Peschke K.H. Christian Ethics, moral Theology in the light of Vat. 2 Vol. 1 1986 loc cit)

The second Vatican Council uses the word conscience not less than seventy – two times in eleven of its seventeen documents. *“In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience”⁷* (Document of Vatican 2 Gadium et spes Vol. 2)

As consequence, conscience is no longer sustained by fear and punishment, but by conviction. Conscience is guided by peace and progress and this is why the common good is at heart of the idea of conscience.

Moral law thus cannot and will not achieve its purpose and guide in human activity or man's life unless the law is known by man, therefore, we cannot discuss this topic without first of all knowing what conscience is all about.

4. Philosophers and Theologians Views

Moorage giving a retrospective account on Socrates spoke of a "*mysterious voice which he called dominion.*"⁸ (Ps. 94: 7-8) This interior voice which will always guide him and tells him not to do certain things Socrates regards it as conscience.

Rousseau was not right in this regard. He describes "*Conscience as an innate principle of Justice and Virtue.*"⁹ (Peschke K.H Christian Ethics, moral Theology in the light of Vat. 2 Vol. 1 1986) Through this, we can judge our own or other men's action to be good or evil.

Joseph Butter one of the 18th century's philosopher has this to say

"We have a capacity of reflecting upon actions and characters and making than an object to our thought and on doing this we naturally and unavoidably approve some actions..."¹⁰ (Peschke K.H. Christian Ethics, moral Theology in the light of Vat. 2 Vol. 1 1986)

He further posited that conscience could be divided into two: conscience as the reflective and conscience as the authoritative faculty. It is reflective because it is intellectual knowledge concerning one's self and it affords the possessor the knowledge of what is right and wrong. He however likens it to the human eye. The authoritative aspect of conscience, means that it registers feelings of obligations, remorse etc.

Immanuel Kant regarded conscience as an instinct to pass judgement upon us in accordance with moral. For Martin Heidegger conscience is seen as the "*inner voice*" a still small voice.

“It tells us what to do and what to avoid, for him, conscience is not a special faculty distinct from the intellect, conscience according to Martin Heidegger is a function of the practical intellect.”¹¹ (Peschke K.H. Christian Ethics, moral Theology in the light of Vat. 2 Vol. 1 1986 loc cit)

However, we must note here that it does not deal with theoretical questions of right or wrong in general such as *“why is lying wrong”, “why must justice be done”*.

Conscience here is applied in three things;

- The intellect as the faculty of forming judgement about right or wrong that an individual acts.
- The processes of reasoning that intellect go through to reach such as judgement.
- The judgement itself which is the conclusion of reasoning process.

Having examined philosophers’ view, we shall continue to see what the theologians have to say.

Pope John Paul II was only in line with the sacred scriptures. In the Old Testament the word conscience was not used except in wisdom 17:11. This does not mean that the notion was not known to the writers, instead they used or referred to it as the *“spirit”, “lions”* and *“heart”*, that which blames, that which is regarded as the spirit of God (Jer. 11: 20, 17: 10, 20: 12, Ps. 26: 2) we also read of bad conscience of our first parents committing sin (Gen. 3: 7ff) and the evil conscience of Cain (Gen 4: 10), Nathan and David (2 Sam. 12).

Also the conscience praises man for his justice (Ps. 26: 1-7, Job 27:6). The judgement of conscience for the Old Testament ultimately is the voice of God, a fact that is evident in Cain’s remorse for his crime.

In the New Testament Christ did not use the word conscience but referred to it as phenomenon, he referred to it as the inner light in us (Matt. 6:23)

*"If the light in you is darkness, what how great is the darkness. "if your whole body is full of light, having no part dark, it will be wholly bright, as when a lamp with its wig gives you light."*¹²(Lk. 11:36)

Conscience is the master and teacher for the traditionalist in so far as it binds them to the law of God as it is made known to them through creation and in so far as it accuses them when they go against reason (Romans 2: 14). In the words of St. Paul "All that is not faith is sin." A perfect conscience is enlightened by faith and quickened by love (2 Cor.1:12).

5. World Religions

The Hindus

The Hindus regarded conscience as "*The invisible God*" who dwells within us.

Commenting on this **Seneca** said that conscience is: "The Holy Spirit dwelling in man as an observer and watcher of good and evil in us (cf Eph. 4)

Jaspers was not left out in his observation and has the same idea with the Hindus. In his words "*It is that voice speaking to man who is himself*".

Muslim Idea

The Muslim religion guides its adherents and their conscience. For them to disobey the conscience is to disobey Allah (God).

Muslims like **Milton** sees conscience as an "umpire". The Muslim idea of conscience is embedded in their religion of Islam.

With all these in mind, one will agree the Fathers of the second Vatican Council who see conscience as the judgement that one gives of oneself with regards to one's way of acting. It is to act with knowledge (cum scientia) i.e. as an act of the intellect judging that an action must be performed as obligating or must be omitted as sinful or may be performed as lawful or advisable as the better course of action.

Furthermore, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council ended their discussion where they said "everybody has the duty and consequently the right to seek the truth in religious matter so that through the use of appropriate means they may prudently form judgement of conscience which are sincere and true." In this, they see conscience as the most secret core and sanctuary of a human.

There human is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths. In a wonderful manner, conscience reveals the law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbour.

It is important to evaluate scholastic theologians (like St. Anselm) and traditional manual of moral theology. They commonly consider conscience not as separate moral faculty but as a particular instance of the operation of reason.

For the Scholastics, conscience is the process in which the general norms of the moral law are applied to as concrete acting which a person is about to perform or has performed telling them what his obligation is here and now.

The Scholastics also consider conscience as a judgement of practical reason. This is also the understanding of St. Thomas Aquinas especially in his *Summa Theologica*.

A different understanding of conscience is also advanced by St. Augustine and the Franciscan School. For Augustine, is the place of the innermost encounter between God and man. Conscience is the divine centre of the person where he is addressed by God. In it, he is aware of God and the soul. This is also in line with the thoughts of Bonaventure and the great mystics of the middle ages. For them, they place the innermost ground of conscience in the "*Scintilla Anima*" the spark of the soul. It is the centre of the soul where man encounters God and is least accessible to the contamination of sin.

Recent theologians generally resume the tradition of the Franciscan school and they place conscience in the ground of the soul. They consider it a reality deeper than reason and will and distinct from both the centre of human person. For them, conscience is man than mere reason, more than mere will, more than mere feeling, it is the depth of human existence, the innermost cure of the person in his directedness towards God and his ultimate substance by him.

Accordingly, conscience is a faculty in its own right, distinct from reason, will and feeling. It is the faculty, situated in the very depth and centre of human person which accords to the human an understanding of meaning and destiny; an awareness of the divine purpose behind the world, a perception of personal calling within God's plan, and an experience of the impression as character of his calling.

Finally, because of its religious dimension conscience is also called the voice of God. The demand of absolute obligation, which is inherent in the dictate of a certain conscience can ultimately only come from God. On the other hand, conscience can evidently err, and that nobody would like to attribute to God. How then is the voice of God. Conscience is the voice of God in this way beyond errors themselves.

It manifested to man the will of God, not in the sense that God wills its errors but in the sense that God wills the good faith and the love of the good of which it remains an expression.

6. Biblical Import on Conscience with Particular Reference to the Book of Second Samuel 12

This is the case in the story of King David and Nathan. We must note here that conscience also praises man for his justice (Psalm 26:1-7 and the book of Job 27:6).

The conscience also blamed King David for his wrong doing and evil. It was his conscience that called him to repentance.

The conscience blamed him and called him to a serious repentance. This is because the conscience is regarded as the spirit of God. (Jer. 11:20, 17:10; Ps. 26:2).

Conscience for David is referred to as the "heart" or lion's hence he went down in fasting and ashes when he discovered that he has offended God. For David the heart blames. The heart blames after committing sin or committing evil, which is also a call to repentance.

For David, the judgement of conscience is subject to that of God and love springs from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith.

Quoting an ancient Egyptian text; the heart is an excellent witness and one must not transgress against its words. This was what called David to repentance. Injustice, selfishness and greed can cause transgress of the law (2 Samuel 12:1-13).

7. Types of Conscience

There are different types of conscience which this paper intends to explore.

1. Certain Conscience

This is called the true conscience. It is called true when it corresponds to the objective moral norm.

*"A certain conscience must always be obeyed when it commands or forbids."*¹³ (Peschke K.H Christian Ethics, moral Theology in the light of Vat. 2 Vol. 1 1986 p. 174)

For St. Paul, whatever that does not proceed from faith is sinful. He means that one's actions must be performed with convictions. Conscience gives us the right insight to law.

Action carried out in certain conscience excludes any fear of error.

There is a second type of conscience;

2. Doubtful and Perplexed Conscience

Conscience is doubtful when it is the state of uncertainty as to the lawfulness or obligation of an action. There is a doubt whenever there is solidly probable reason. B.V. Lobo confirms this when he said; *"The doubt may concern either the existence or the meaning of the moral principle (doubt of law) or the existence of a fact (doubt of fact)."*¹⁴ (B.V. Lobo *Guide to Christian living, a new compendium of moral Theology* 1987 p.302)

For instance, when one doubts whether therapeutic abortion is lawful, there is a doubt of law. If one doubts whether there is a foetus growth in the uterus, it is that of fact. Doubt can be either speculative that is concerning an ethical principle (whether an ectopic pregnancy may be terminated), or practical, concerning what is to be done here and now.

As regards a doubtful conscience one may never act, otherwise one would expose oneself to the violation of God's will. On this note St. Paul said; *"But he who has doubt is condemned, if he acts because he does not act from faith (is not in good faith)."*

When one finds himself in this situation the action may be postponed until practical certainty is reached. This can be achieved either by reflection or by consultation with experts or relevant books. Perplexed conscience is a type of erroneous conscience that is confronted with two alternative precepts, fears sin in whatever choice it makes. For example, a wife who is caring for a sick husband on Sunday, may fear that she will sin in any event either by failing to attend mass or by failing to take care of the husband.

*"If doubt cannot be solved directly, one could try to attain practical certainty by having recourse to reflex principles. These are rules of prudence that do not resolve the speculative doubt but only indicate the practical step to be taken."*¹⁵ (Peschke K.H. Christian Ethics, moral Theology in the light of Vat. 2 Vol. 1 1986 op. Cit P. 175)

In doubt, we must stand on the side where presumption (of right) stands. Here justice may not be upheld in all cases. A doubtful law does not bind (*Lax dubia non obligate*). The reason is that freedom cannot be bound except by a certain obligation. In doubt, presumption stands for the usual and the ordinary. In doubt, for example, with regard to property the condition of the actual possessor is the better. If one after taking pains and find out the rightful owner of a property fails one may retain the object in presumption that the possessor gives good title, until the contrary is proved. In doubt, the accused is to be favoured, the crime is not to be presumed, but is to be proved when a definite object is to be attained; the safer course must be followed. For instance, one may not doubtfully administer a sacrament except in an emergency.

The principle about which a doubtful law is considered not binding only to a doubt of law and not doubt of fact but sometimes a doubt of fact can be reduced to a doubt of law.

3. Scrupulous Conscience

The word scrupulous comes from the latin word "*scrupulum*" the diminutive of "scrupulous" name given to a small pebble and the smallest weight measure in ancient Rome.

*"Scrupulosity is painful condition in which the person suffers from as uncontrollable fear regarding the lawfulness of an act to be done or of one already done."*¹⁶ (B.V. Lobo Guide to Christian living, a new compendium of moral Theology 1987 op, cit 304) Peschke again went further to say that *"scrupulosity is the persistence, growing, unreasonable fear that one has offended God or is about to do so."*¹⁷ (Peschke K.H. Christian Ethics, moral Theology in the light of Vat. 2 Vol. 1 1986 p. 165)

Scrupulous conscience is of three types;

1. Temporary emotional unrest and doubt it is some critical stage of life e.g. puberty generally is a crisis of growth which passes away living the sufferer more matured if handled properly or carefully.

2. Scruple of compensation: This according to Peschke is a disquieted unrest of conscience which conceals fundamental call of generosity in the spiritual life.

3. Real scrupulosity: This is also called obsessive-compulsive scrupulosity. This is the most severe and for some authors, the most deserving of the name scrupulosity in the real sense. Real scrupulosity is a psychic or emotional sickness. It is a type of neurosis that expresses itself in an anxious concern of a moral and religious nature that when faced with choice is terrified at the prospect of sinning. After an action he is inclined to examine it over and over again to find possible aspect of guilt.

*"A scrupulous person manifests a certain amount of stubbornness. They discover sin where there is no sin."*¹⁸ (Snoech A. Confession and Pastoral psychology, westminister, mich, Newman 1961 p. 1) Lobo G.V. went further to name sins of a scrupulous conscience

1. **Stubbornness of judgement** – A scrupulous person is not easily convinced of his mistake. He asks advice from many and is not satisfied with any. He does not obey easily.
2. **Fear of committing sin in everything:** the scrupulous person thinks that even touching another's hand is sin.
3. **Frequent change of judgement:** for instance, in the recitation of the divine office, or the Rosary, the scrupulous person repeats words fearing that he has not pronounced them correctly, or repeats the psalm already recited fearing that he has not said it.

4. Lax Conscience

A lax conscience is usually the result of grave lukewarmness in the service of God, as depicted in Apocalypse 3:15-20. Christ counsels the lax members of His church to buy from Him the remedies of their lukewarmness. This is gained through a change of attitude by living a good religious life.

According to Peschke; *"The antithesis to lax conscience is the tender conscience of the delicate conscience which is characterised by a clear and vigilant discernment of the good."*¹⁹ (Peschke K. H. Christian Ethics, moral Theology in the light of Vat. 2 Vol. 1 1986 cit 164) Going further; *"A lax conscience means permanent moral dullness, gradual heading of the conscience."*²⁰ (Ibid 164)

The lax conscience is inclined to judge a thing to be lawful which is sinful, or something to be a venial sin when it is actually a mortal sin.

For example, a worker may regularly engage in petty thievery from his employer without realising he is being unjust. According to P.A. Liege; *"A lax conscience is over come by fidelity to one's religious duties and better instruction."*²¹ (Liege P. A. *What is Christian Life? London Burns and Oates 1961 p. 306*)

8. Characteristics of a Rightly Formed Conscience

It is rational-able to assess people and situations calmly and without prejudice.

□□□□ It is autonomous – It decides freely but in agreement with other people. It is said that it *"does not make decision merely with the awareness of authority of with a feeling of weakness and dependence."*²² (G. V. Lobo *Guide to Christian living, a new compendium of moral Theology p.293*)

□□□ It is responsible – It is able to accept responsibility. It is able to accept and bear the short-term and long term consequences of one's decisions. It takes responsible risks for a worthy cause.

□□□ It is altruistic – Being influence by the needs and interests of one's fellowmen. It has the quality of sacrificing self interest for the sake of others. Quoting Vat. 2 George said;

*"A mature conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbour."*²³ (loc cit) Love provides the basic direction for moral action says Vatican II council.

9. Conscience as a Determinant of Morality Vis-A-Vis Sin and its Implication on the Nigerian Society

For the purpose of clarity we shall strive to know the meaning of morality and sin then go to that which determines morality. D.J.B hawkin defines morality as;

*"Moral obligation which is not only a categorised imperative in Kant's meaning but a service for which we are responsible to a personal Lord."*²⁴ (Peschke K.H. Christian Ethics, moral Theology in the light of Vat. 2 Vol. 1 1986 p.288)

The conscience determines whether an act is sinful or not, hence the definition of sin. According to the Old Testament definition of sin; *"Is a transgression of God's law and will."*²⁵ (loc cit)

It is also seen as; *"A rejection of God and his divine plan."*²⁶ These sins or rejection of God affects the society morally and deters the growth of any society and their conscience is killed by this sin. A dead conscience or corrupt conscience cannot speak or seek the truth because ones morality is distributed. Bribery for instance can go a long way in damaging the moral principles or norms of the society and can affect the standard of living of the society. It is by-passing of the rule, its transgression. It is disobedience against the commandments of the Lord (Deut. 28:15-68, Jeri. 3: 25) sin in the N.T. is regarded; *"As ungrateful discretion of the lord."*²⁷ (loc cit)

The Apostle of the Gentile speaking on conscience said; *"I am speaking the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit..."* (Rom. 9:1f)

He (Paul) went further to say that;

"For our boast is this the testimony of our conscience is that we have behaved in the world, and still more toward you, with holiness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God"(2 Cor. 1: 12-13).

The good conscience undoubtedly implies the absence of fault, that is why it is the determinant of human morality. This includes the constant practice of good works, when we are sure that our conscience is clear we are certainly determined to behave honourably in everything we do (Heb. 13:18).

A good conscience is characterised here by this constant will to persevere in the good, thus steadfastness to God. A clear conscience is allied to faith. St. Paul exhorts the deacons to

"Hold the mystery of the faith with clear conscience." (1 Tim. 3:9)

The life of faith requires the purity of moral existence, the preservation of Christian orthodoxy comes about under the protection of a good conscience. Faith strengthens the conscience. The bad conscience is corrupt, marked with the stigma of Satan which is sin.

Those that are corrupt lack faith, nothing is pure in them, their very minds and conscience is corrupt. They are unfit for good deeds (Titus 1:15f). The scriptures condemn this kind of conscience what is morally bad or evil (cf Heb 9:9-14, 22)

10. The Responsibility of Conscience

A responsible conscience presupposes a profound appreciation of human decision. Our world has become extra-ordinarily complicated as a result of technical specialisation and world-wide pressure which influences the most personal elements of our being, because of these difficulties. *"A Christian needs more than ever an understanding decisive choice."*²⁸ (The Christians Conscience. Op cit 38)

On this note one may ask; how can I know what Christ wants me to do? In this situation one is accompanied by whatever facts are psychologically determined, with one's temperament and education. From another point of view, I am in organic unity with Christ; in contact with faith. Christ calls and I respond. This is what the question demands. The responsibility of a conscience is acting in accordance with the mind of Christ. There are risks and the risk should not frighten us, for life always involves risk. I must come to decision and act. If we refrain from acting and neutralise conflicts, it is an indication of our spinelessness and the reason why we are moral absentees and sinners of omission. Many Christians are afraid of life and freedom. Christ does not want the obedience of a slave from us. We can never have a conscience that is too free, too personal and enlightened. Our actions should lead us to God.

It's Implication on the Nigerian Society

Conscience is used as a covenantal pact especially in settling cases or disputes and swearing in case of quarrels and land disputes. The elders are also guided by their conscience in their judgement and peace-making.

One can therefore state that the conscience for the Nigerian man is his eye, watch door and an umpire.

The implication is that he cannot do anything against his conscience or not directed by his conscience. The conscience is used as his witness and his relationship with his God and neighbour.

Conscience is life, hence, for a good action one is always guided by the true conscience. The implication of a morally sound conscience means a sound and a health and peaceful society.

The absence of a moral norm can bring chaos and disorder in the society. And for a good judgement ones conscience must be morally upright. An upright conscience judges rightly and correct with little or no mistake. A morally sound conscience is happy and avoids occasions of sin like – killing, corruption, thief and other social vices that can affect the society. Since conscience is that which corresponds the objective norms of morality. Conscience is used as a covenantal pact. The Nigerian man is always sure that he has a *“True or certain conscience”* before going out his action or duties. He believes that when he has doubt or lax conscience he will suspend his judgement or action. His actions and judgement are guided by *“certain conscience.”*

For the Nigerian man he has only a *“scrupulous conscience”* if he has offended his God and his conscience begins to blame him. He begins to mourn or weep because of fear or punishment or impending danger.

In conclusion, the Nigerian people in all they do are guided by the conscience hence his action will offend his God or gods and neighbour.

Conclusion

Having gone thus far it could be that conscience should not be conceived of as an independent supreme court which can be judged by no man and which merits loyalty from the part of the individual and uncritical respect from everyone else. Conscience, in a word, gives relief from the abstract structures of "Positive Law" and dominant custom. It endows us with the power of dissent.

Through the medium of conscience, moral obligation is personalised. In it, we find refuge from the inevitable insensitivities of generalisations that mar the rule of fleshless law.

In conclusion, the discussion on conscience has helped to expose all its aspects. From the discussion we are able to know that we are obliged even to follow an erroneous conscience and advised on how best to form our conscience to avoid seeing sin where there is none, because such attitude hinders moral, social and spiritual growth which is a bad stat.