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Conscience and Its Verdicts

Joseph M. Dunne
Lecturer in Philosophy
The University of Michigan - Dearborn
Concordia University - Ann Arbor
jmdunne@umich.edu
joseph.dunne@cuw.edu

Abstract: This paper overviews an historical account (Richard Sorabji) and biblical accounts (Andrew Naselli and J. D. Crowley) of the concept of conscience to demonstrate a broad, conceptual compatibility between the two accounts, which can be supported by mature Christian anthropologies but that should not be understood as an account of the necessary and jointly sufficient features for conscience. The paper concludes by working through a handful of anthropological points, which highlights that conscience and its verdicts possess a sort of dual cognitive-affective nature.

I. Introduction

While many would agree that the conscience is an important historical and theological concept, it nevertheless seems rarely understood or fully appreciated in most Christian anthropologies. My goal in this short essay is to begin ameliorating at least some of this misunderstanding and underappreciation of an otherwise central concept to Christianity. To accomplish this modest aim, I attempt to do two things. First, I overview both Richard Sorabji's historical account of the concept of conscience and Andrew Naselli and J. D. Crowley's Biblical account of conscience in order to demonstrate a broad, conceptual compatibility between the two. In detailing and synthesizing their accounts, a relatively stable notion of conscience and its verdicts will emerge that can be supported by mature Christian anthropologies but that should not be understood as an account of the necessary and jointly sufficient features for conscience. Finally, I conclude the piece by working through a handful of anthropological points worth highlighting once we endorse the previously established idea that conscience and its verdicts possess a sort of dual cognitive-affective nature.

II. The Birth of Conscience

Accounts detailing the historicity of the concept of conscience within the Western tradition have often begun with the Hebrew Old Testament, citing stories involving well-known figures like King David. Though the Ancient Hebrews lacked a specific word for conscience, it is nevertheless evident that they had the concept.¹ In Psalm 51, for example, we see David caught up in the snares of what seems to be a guilty conscience, lamenting his sinful decision to both commit adultery with Bathsheba and order the wrongful death of her husband Uriah. Consider his words in that psalm:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me...Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.²

As historian of philosophy Richard Sorabji points out, most of the examples like this highlighted from the Hebrew Old Testament, including Psalm 51, “used for conscience only the general word for heart, the seat of many different emotions.”³

John Cottingham argues that three key features of the concept of conscience can be readily gleaned from a cursory reading of Psalm 51. First, he thinks that conscience involves “a directing inwards by the subject of the kind of disapproval characteristically felt at the untoward behavior of another.”⁴

¹ Modern Hebrew has since introduced the term ‘matzpun’ to denote the concept of conscience.

² Psalm 51:1-3, 7-12, ESV.

³ Richard Sorabji, *Moral Conscience Through the Ages: Fifth Century BCE to the Present* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 11.

⁴ John Cottingham, “Conscience, Guilt, and Shame,” in *The Oxford Handbook of The History of Ethics*, ed. Roger Crisp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 731.

As the language of the Psalm demonstrates, David is certainly directing a disapproving attitude toward his own self once he reflects upon his behaviors against both Bathsheba and Uriah. “Second, it is linked to remorse and repentance, which is in turn made possible by a deepening both of self-awareness and empath.”⁵ Cottingham notes that, once David is confronted for his sins by the prophet Nathan in 2 Samuel 12:1-15, David’s “previously shallow grasp of the significance of his actions was altered under the imaginative stimulus of being presented with a vivid analogue of his own conduct, which made him start to appreciate how being treated in such a way would feel for the victim.”⁶ Lastly, Cottingham notes that “the required response is not simply implanted from the outside by the prophet’s condemnation but is partly elicited from within.”⁷ In other words, once the prophet Nathan lifts some of David’s “emotional and cognitive barriers” by having him identify with the characters in the parable, “it is David’s own conscience that convicts him.”⁸

Just like the Ancient Hebrews, the Early Greeks likewise failed to have a specific term for conscience, but this did not mean that they lacked the concept either. In fact, Sorabji thinks the Greeks “may equally have supplied examples of moral conscience without [invoking] the word.”⁹ The earliest basic conceptual expression that eventually came to be the standard term for conscience began to appear in the Greek playwrights of the fifth century BC.¹⁰ The early, basic expression involved the metaphor of one sharing knowledge with oneself, usually of a moral defect, as though one were split into two. The metaphor explains that when we possess knowledge of a moral defect, i.e., possess a guilty conscience, it feels like we’re split into two and composed of two different people: “one of them knows of the defect but is keeping it a secret; the other shares the secret—in cases of moral conscience, a guilty one.”¹¹ Another common phrase similarly describing the nature of a guilty conscience is found in the expression “I could not live with myself.”¹² Over time, who it is that the guilty knowledge was shared with would, perhaps predictably, vary.

⁵ John Cottingham, “Conscience, Guilt, and Shame,” 731.

⁶ Cottingham, 731.

⁷ Cottingham, 731.

⁸ Cottingham, 731.

⁹ Richard Sorabji, *Moral Conscience Through the Ages*, 11.

¹⁰ Sorabji, 11-12.

¹¹ Sorabji, 12.

¹² James F. Childress, “Appeals to Conscience,” *Ethics* 89 (1979), 315-35.

Despite this, Sorabji argues that the meaning of the conscience metaphor “is at first unambiguous” and standardly “involves one’s own knowledge of one’s own fault.”¹³

As indicated above, the basic split-self metaphor for conscience was eventually expressed terminologically—“by a particular form of the [Greek] verb for knowing, *suneidenai*, to share (*sun-*) knowledge (*eidenai*), coupled with the reflexive pronoun in the dative (e.g., *heautôi* [oneself]).”¹⁴ Fortunately, this Greek idiom concerning conscience would translate seamlessly into Latin. The *con-* in the Latin noun *conscientia* is a simple translation of the Greek *sun-* and the *scientia* is a simple translation of the Greek *eidêsis*.¹⁵ Thus, in Latin: *con* + *scientia* = *conscientia* (or sharing knowledge with oneself). As Sorabji notes, it was by “strange good fortune [that] a literal translation, not a paraphrase, of the Greek term was used, which helped the Latin avoid “importing its own presuppositions into the very choice of word.”¹⁶

As with most concepts, conscience would develop, mature, and prune through time. For example, though the concept of conscience started off as merely sharing knowledge with oneself of a past moral defect, it would later come to include knowledge of what would make one at fault in the future as well. Some, like the Apostle Paul argued that the conscience was intimately tied, though not identical to, a general moral law existing in our hearts and would draw from this moral law in order to accuse or excuse our behaviors in the present.¹⁷ Moreover, the conscience was normally understood, especially in Christianity, as fallible in its endeavors. In being open to error, conscience was therefore best understood as a belief or a belief-producing capacity that may or may not amount to genuine knowledge.¹⁸ In time conscience became “a belief about what it was, or would be, wrong or not wrong for one to do or not to do”—and this applied to one’s past or future attitudes as well.¹⁹ The conscience also came to be ascribed with motivating force even though it was a belief and thus cognitive in nature.

¹³ Sorabji, 12; See also: C.A. Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament* (London: SCM-Canterbury Press, 1955), 38.

¹⁴ Sorabji, 12.

¹⁵ Sorabji, 14.

¹⁶ Sorabji, 14.

¹⁷ Romans 2:14-15.

¹⁸ Sorabji, 35.

¹⁹ Sorabji, 35.

Sorabji explains that we can understand this marriage of affection and cognition in conscience and its verdicts if we understand how “rational knowledge of evaluative propositions about what is or is not wrong can itself be motivating, for example, if I know that some action to which I am tempted or which I have performed is wrong.”²⁰

In summary, Sorabji thinks that the “first six hundred years of the development of the idea of moral conscience identified some attributes which remained comparatively stable features over the next two thousand years.”²¹ These eight, core features—some of which clearly overlap with the features of Cottingham’s analysis of conscience in Psalm 51 above—are as follows:²²

1. Conscience is a form of *personal self-awareness* that is not invariably an awareness of *others*.
2. Conscience draws on values not necessarily shared by others.
3. Conscience originally involved the idea of a person split into two, with one self-hiding a guilty secret, and the other self-sharing it. The idea of conscience as involving a split person was to recur in different forms and with different rationales in Adam Smith, in Kant, and in Freud, and is found in the expression “I could not live with myself.”
4. The original function of the conscience was retrospective, but very soon prospective functions developed and all of these were retained.
5. Although conscience drew on general values, it was very much concerned with what was or would be wrong for the *particular* individual in a *particular* context.
6. The concept of conscience started off secular, originating in the Greek playwrights of the fifth century BCE, and remains capable of being secular.
7. Conscience was traditionally viewed in Christianity as fallible.
8. Though a belief and hence cognitive in character, conscience nonetheless had motivating force.

²⁰ Sorabji, 35.

²¹ Sorabji, 36.

²² Sorabji, 36.

II. Conscience in The New Testament

In the English New Testament, the term ‘conscience’ translates the Greek term ‘syneidēsis’—a word that occurs thirty times.²³ And, perhaps unfortunately, the term ‘conscience’ is one of those rare instances where a theologically important word from the New Testament lacks a parallel word or word-group in the Hebrew Old Testament (even though the concept is present, as argued above). After reviewing the thirty instances of syneidēsis in the New Testament, Andrew Naselli and J. D. Crowley offer the following framework concerning the various ways in which the New Testament speaks of conscience:²⁴

Speaking about Conscience Positively

1. The conscience can be good in the sense of blameless, clear, clean, and pure. (Acts 23:1, 24:16; 1 Timothy 1:5, 19, 3:9; 2 Timothy 1:3; Hebrews 13:18; 1 Peter 3:16, 21).
2. The conscience can be cleansed, that is, cleared, perfected, purified, washed, purged, and sprinkled clean. (Hebrews 9:9, 14; 10:22).

Speaking about Conscience Negatively

1. The conscience can be weak. (1 Corinthians 8:7, 10, 12).
2. The conscience can be wounded. (1 Corinthians 8:12).
3. The conscience can be defiled. (1 Corinthians 8:7; Titus 1:15).
4. The conscience can be encouraged or emboldened to sin. (1 Corinthians 8:10).
5. The conscience can be evil or guilty. (Hebrews 10:22).
6. The conscience can be seared as with a hot iron. (1 Timothy 4:2).

Furthermore, Naselli and Crowley argue that the conscience can perform three actions according to the New Testament data:

²³ Andrew Naselli and J. D. Crowley, *Conscience: What It Is, How to Train It, and Loving Those Who Differ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 32-33. According to Naselli and Crowley, the verses containing the Greek term syneidēsis are as follows: Acts 23:1, 24:16; Romans 2:15, 9:1, 13:5; 1 Corinthians 8:7, 10, 12, 10:25, 27, 28, 29; 2 Corinthians 1:12, 4:2, 5:11; 1 Timothy 1:5, 19, 3:19, 4:2; 2 Timothy 1:3; Titus 1:15; Hebrews 9:9b, 14, 10:2, 22, 13:18; 1 Peter 2:19, 3:16, 21.

²⁴ Andrew Naselli and J. D. Crowley, *Conscience*, 40-42.

1. The conscience can bear witness or confirm. (Romans 2:15, 9:1; 2 Corinthians 1:12, 4:2, 5:11).
2. The conscience can judge or try to determine another person's freedom (1 Corinthians 10:29).
3. The conscience can lead one to act a certain way. The New Testament gives four examples: it can lead you either to accuse or defend yourself based on how your conscience bears witness (Romans 2:15); it can lead you to submit to the authorities (Romans 13:5); it can lead you not to bother asking where your meat came from because eating meat sacrificed to idols is not something your conscience should condemn you for (1 Corinthians 10:25, 27); and it can lead you not to eat meat that someone tells you was sacrificed to idols for the sake of that person's conscience. (1 Corinthians 10:28).

Given this, Naselli and Crowley believe that conscience is best understood as “your consciousness of what you believe is right and wrong.”²⁵ From this definition they draw out several implications.

First, they argue that conscience produces different results for different people based on different moral standards. In other words, different consciences will produce different verdicts given different moral standards or different fundamental beliefs about right and wrong. Relatedly, they argue that no two people have exactly the same conscience; otherwise, they claim, “we wouldn't need passages like Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8, which teach people with differing consciences how to get along in their church.”²⁶ Despite this, they nevertheless believe that “people usually agree much more in matters of conscience than they disagree.”²⁷ Naselli and Crowley are nevertheless careful, however, to distinguish what we may *believe* are the correct moral standards or what we *believe* is actually right and wrong from what *is, in fact*, the correct moral standards or *actually* right and wrong. This point helps explain, for example, why a clear conscience is necessary but not sufficient for moral blamelessness.

Second, they note that conscience can change over time given that your fundamental moral standards or beliefs about right and wrong can (and often do) change over time.

²⁵ Naselli and Crowley, 42.

²⁶ Naselli and Crowley, 26.

²⁷ Naselli and Crowley, 26.

They also note that some changes can damage conscience by “making it insensitive and by making it oversensitive.”²⁸ We can make conscience *insensitive* by “developing a habit of ignoring its voice of warnings so that the voice gets weaker and weaker and finally disappears.”²⁹ And we can make conscience *oversensitive* by “packing it with too many rules that are actually matters of opinion, not right and wrong.”³⁰ However, even when our conscience changes in a positive way, they nevertheless contend that no one’s conscience perfectly matches God’s will even though we all tend to assume that our particular conscience does perfectly match God’s will.³¹ To this point, they add that “as we come to understand God’s revealed will more and more, we will have opportunities to add rules to our conscience that God’s Word clearly teaches and weed out rules that God’s Word treats as optional.”³² Such processes admittedly take place over a lifetime and will require “the Spirit of God, the Word of God, and the church of God to help us” garden our consciences well.³³

Finally, they explain that conscience functions as a guide, monitor, witness, and judge for us. By this, they just mean that “your conscience *guides* you to help you conform to moral standards, *monitors* how you conform to them, *testifies* to how you conform to them, and *judges* you for how you conform to them, thus making you feel guilt and pain.”³⁴

III. Two Major Historical Deviations

Sorabji contends that, even though the concept of conscience has been subject to various interpretations since its genesis—including “the recent secularization of conscience”—it nevertheless does “not necessarily require all that many revisions” from its original picture.³⁵ Though the history of the concept of conscience reveals two “prolonged deviations” from its basic structure in the first 600 years, these deviations fortunately “did not last indefinitely.”³⁶

²⁸ Naselli and Crowley, 29.

²⁹ Naselli and Crowley, 29.

³⁰ Naselli and Crowley, 29.

³¹ Naselli and Crowley, 27.

³² Naselli and Crowley, 28.

³³ Naselli and Crowley, 28.

³⁴ Naselli and Crowley, 43.

³⁵ Sorabji, 215.

³⁶ Sorabji, 215.

More specifically, the first deviation was “the need to accommodate *synderesis* alongside conscience, which made one difference if *synderesis* took over the motivational role from conscience, or another difference if it relegated conscience to the act of drawing a conclusion rather than holding a belief.”³⁷ And the second deviation “was the idea that conscience was a sentiment of approval or disapproval, or even a sensation of pain, rather than a belief or capacity for belief about what conduct or attitude was or would be wrong for one, a belief that might *cause* sentiments or pain.”³⁸

A. Conscience and Synderesis

The first deviation was most prominent in the Middle Ages and arguably stemmed from Origen’s interpretation of Ezekiel’s vision of the four-faced creatures in Ezekiel 1:10.³⁹ The creatures in this passage are described as having the face of a human, lion, ox, and eagle—and Origen interpreted the first three faces as corresponding to the three parts of Plato’s tripartite soul (rational, spirited, and appetitive parts).⁴⁰ Whereas Origen interpreted the fourth part as “the human’s spirit (*spiritus*) presiding over the other three,”⁴¹ Jerome would later “refer the eagle to a fourth part, for which the Greeks have a name, and which is the ‘spark of conscience’ by which we recognize that we are sinning.”⁴² So, Jerome, likely drawing upon Origen and his followers, seemed to have mistakenly distinguished between conscience (*conscientia*) and the spark of conscience (*synderesis*).

Bonaventure would later distinguish between *conscientia* and *synderesis* as well, where the basis of his distinction was that conscience played a predominantly cognitive role and *synderesis* played a predominantly affective role.⁴³ Similarly, Aquinas would distinguish between conscience and *synderesis*, but would give them different functions. For Aquinas, *synderesis* supplied universal premises from the natural law and was “never mistaken, but in effect infallible.”⁴⁴

³⁷ Sorabji, 215.

³⁸ Sorabji, 215.

³⁹ Ezekiel 1:10, ESV: As for the likeness of their faces, each had a human face. The four had the face of a lion on the right side, the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and the four had the face of an eagle.

⁴⁰ Sorabji, 59.

⁴¹ Sorabji, 59.

⁴² Sorabji, 59.

⁴³ Sorabji, 61.

⁴⁴ Sorabji, 63.

Conscience, on the other hand, was simply the “act of applying the universal premise to a particular situation.”⁴⁵ As opposed to Bonaventure, Aquinas would grant conscience “no less than *synderesis* motivational force,” believing that *synderesis* “warns, inclines, incites, and deters” and that conscience “can prospectively prod, urge, or bind, and retrospectively accuse or cause remorse.”⁴⁶ Ultimately, William of Ockham would later dispense of *synderesis* on the basis of his famous *Ockham’s Razor*—a trend that was upheld by the Protestant reformers Martin Luther (at least beyond 1519) and John Calvin.⁴⁷

In the spirit of Ockham, Sorabji also believes that “the division of labor” between *synderesis* and conscience was “not needed for the purpose of explaining motivation.”⁴⁸ He writes:

For knowledge or belief is itself motivating, provided it is the knowledge or belief that some action would, or would not, be wrong for one to perform in an expected situation calling for decision. Bonaventure has found a task for *synderesis* to perform, but if I am right, the task could have been performed without it.⁴⁹

For this reason, Sorabji thinks that the Apostle Paul’s simpler distinction between “the law in our hearts with its *general* knowledge of right and wrong [and] the conscience that accused or excused us as *individuals*” had supplied all that was needed.⁵⁰ Additionally, Sorabji objects to Aquinas’ account insofar as it is just not true that “we have a disposition to recognize the law infallibly.”⁵¹ Neither the Apostle Paul, Origen, nor Augustine “thought that conscience made us infallible,” and Sorabji agrees alongside them that “humans are not infallible.”⁵²

⁴⁵ Sorabji, 63-64.

⁴⁶ Sorabji, 64.

⁴⁷ Sorabji, 66.

⁴⁸ Sorabji, 61.

⁴⁹ Sorabji, 61.

⁵⁰ Sorabji, 65-66.

⁵¹ Sorabji, 65-66.

⁵² Sorabji, 66.

B. Conscience as Mere Sentiment

The second deviation was “the idea that conscience was a sentiment of approval or disapproval, or even a sensation of pain, rather than a belief or capacity for belief about what conduct or attitude was or would be wrong for one, a belief that might *cause* sentiments or pain.”⁵³ This deviation can trace its roots back to the views of seventeenth and eighteenth century moral sentimentalists like Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Hume in addition to the later English philosopher J. S. Mill. Shaftesbury, for example, argued that we have “a natural sense of right and wrong,” emphasizing that “our sense of right and wrong is a *sense*.”⁵⁴ Hutcheson would agree with Shaftesbury, commonly speaking of “moral *sentiment*, and of the moral *sense*, which is *pleased or displeased* by good or evil.”⁵⁵ Likewise, Hume also spoke of a “moral *sense* and connected conscience with *passion* instead of *reason*.”⁵⁶ Mill would end up defining “the essence of conscience” as a “feeling in our own mind; a pain more or less intense, attendant on violation of duty,” showing that Mill also thought about conscience as a sensation.⁵⁷

Contrary to the sentimentalists and Mill, Sorabji sees this position—that conscience is essentially a sentiment or sensation, not a belief or capacity for beliefs—as not only a derivation from the original concept, but a misguided view in its own right.

⁵³ Sorabji, 215.

⁵⁴ Sorabji, 168.

⁵⁵ Sorabji, 168-69.

⁵⁶ Sorabji, 169. See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, Part III, Section II, Paragraph 10: “Reason is wholly inactive and can never be the source of so active a principle as conscience, or a sense of morals.”

⁵⁷ Sorabji, 169. See J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chapter 3, Paragraph 4: “The internal sanction of duty, whatever our standard of duty may be, is one and the same – a feeling in our own mind; a pain, more or less intense, attendant on violation of duty, which in properly cultivated moral natures rises, in the more serious cases, into shrinking from it as an impossibility. This feeling, when disinterested, and connecting itself with the pure idea of duty, and not with some particular form of it, or with any of the merely accessory circumstances, is the essence of Conscience; ... [Conscience’s] binding force, however, consists in the existence of a mass of feeling which must be broken through in order to do what violates our standard of right, and which, if we do nevertheless violate that standard, will probably have to be encountered afterwards in the form of remorse. Whatever theory we have of the nature or origin of conscience, this is what essentially constitutes it.”

Sorabji argues that a “sensation can indeed motivate, but if conscience is only a sensation, it will presumably be *produced by* value judgments about wrong, which are now no longer incorporated within conscience itself.”⁵⁸ From Antiquity through the Middle Ages, bites of conscience were understood as a “mere *effect* of bad conscience, with bad conscience itself being a belief about one’s wrongdoing.”⁵⁹ Relegating conscience to a mere sensation, then, would amount to equating it with what was once understood as an effect that it produced. Even if one believes that conscience gives rise to sentiments and sensations of approval or disapproval, as Sorabji does, “such a sentiment will presumably be an *effect* of value judgments about wrong or not wrong which caused the sentiments.”⁶⁰

IV. Sorabji’s Core Concept of Conscience

Overall, Sorabji concludes that the “core conception of conscience which I have found to be most influential contains the following ideas:”⁶¹

1. It is a person’s belief about what actions or attitudes had been in the past, or would be in the future, wrong or not wrong for him to adopt or not adopt in a particular situation. It could also be the capacity for such beliefs. The beliefs may be the things believed or the believing of them.
2. The beliefs require personal self-awareness and are in the first instance beliefs about what would be wrong for oneself.
3. Conscience is motivating because it is a value belief about what was or would be wrong for oneself. It can therefore cause both sentiments of approval or disapproval and painful or comforting sensations.
4. This connection with being in the wrong accounts for the force of, and respect for, conscience of others, for no one wants to be in the wrong. We do not have to look for something contingently and variably connected, such as its sometimes being central to people’s identity, or causing intensity of feeling, or contributing to self-direction.
5. Conscience is acquired, not innate, not present from birth.
6. It draws on values which need not take the form of laws, but which are in danger of reflecting merely local convention, and therefore require constant reflection and awareness of other values.

⁵⁸ Sorabji, 169.

⁵⁹ Sorabji, 169.

⁶⁰ Sorabji, 169.

⁶¹ Sorabji, 216-17.

7. It is not the voice of God, and its value does not depend on whether the values derive from God.
8. It is not infallible.
9. Conscience creates an obligation, but not always an overriding obligation, since there can be counter-obligations, so that one is in a double bind, wrong if one does follow conscience and wrong if one does not.
10. Freedom of conscience is the absence, within limits, of forcible constraint by authority not only on one's value beliefs, but also on the actions which those value beliefs forbid or require.
11. Freedom of conscience is a narrower term than toleration. Toleration can be recommended on many grounds besides the desirability of freedom of conscience, such as the need for peace.
12. Freedom of religion is not the same as freedom of conscience, but the two overlap and many of the same arguments can be given for both. Conscience, however, can be secular, and there are some advantages in its being so.
13. Freedom of conscience has different meanings.

V. Synthesizing the Historical and Biblical Accounts

With a good grasp of Sorabji's historical account of the concept of conscience, and Naselli and Crowley's Biblical account, we can now turn to demonstrating a broad, conceptual compatibility between the two. As noted above, I think that this kind of synthesizing exercise is helpful given that a relatively stable notion of conscience will emerge that can be supported by mature Christian anthropologies. And even though the exercise will not yield a set of necessary and jointly sufficient features for conscience, the goal of ameliorating some of the common misunderstanding and underappreciation of an otherwise central concept to Christianity is still met.

For Naselli and Crowley, conscience is just our consciousness of what we believe is right and wrong. So, when we compare this to the first feature of Sorabji's definition of conscience—namely, that it is a person's belief or else capacity to form beliefs about what actions or attitudes had been in the past, or would be in the future, wrong or not wrong for him to adopt or not adopt in a particular situation—we see that they are very similar. Contrary to Sorabji, Naselli and Crowley only seem to highlight conscience beliefs in their definition without explicitly referencing conscience as a capacity.

This does not mean, however, that their definition is incompatible with Sorabji's definition of conscience but may only reflect one aspect of his account—which remains agnostic about whether conscience refers specifically to the things believed or to the believing of them. A simple synthesis of their views could be as follows: *conscience refers to the capacity to form beliefs about what actions or attitudes had been in the past, or would be in the future, wrong or not wrong for him to adopt or not adopt in a particular situation, and conscience beliefs just refer to these beliefs.* The case for the general compatibility of both accounts is furthered when we emphasize the second feature of Sorabji's conscience in conjunction with the first: conscience beliefs require personal self-awareness and are in the first instance beliefs about what would be wrong for oneself. Both definitions emphasize that conscience involves beliefs that we are aware or conscious of concerning what actions or attitudes are right or wrong for us to adopt—either in the past, present or future—in a given situation.

Naselli and Crowley also claim that their account of conscience implies that conscience can, and oftentimes does, produce different results for people based on different moral standards or different fundamental beliefs about right and wrong. They claim that “what you believe is right and wrong is not necessarily the same as what actually is right and wrong...So someone's ‘clear’ conscience may actually be evil because it is based on immoral standards.”⁶² In short, what they are highlighting here is something that Sorabji also highlights: that different people can hold vastly different conscience beliefs because we hold to different moral standards or moral values. Both Naselli and Crowley, as well as Sorabji, seem to understand conscience, therefore, not as the supplier of our values, but instead as the applier of our values.⁶³ Conscience is, therefore, a value-neutral capacity insofar as it applies our values or moral standards—whatever they might be and however we came to hold them—to our actions or attitudes to produce beliefs about how they measure up to those values. And in the words of Naselli and Crowley, we might say that conscience guides us into conformity with whatever values or standards that we endorse, monitors and testifies to how well we're conforming to them, and judges us on our fidelity to them.

⁶² Naselli and Crowley, 42.

⁶³ Sorabji, 218: “It is not conscience (at least not conscience in the core sense) that has to *supply* our values in the first place. St. Paul ascribes the inner law to God; a secular view should agree that conscience is never the original source of our values, even though particular decisions of conscience can lead to new reflection on general values, without being their original source. Conscience rather *applies* values to the conduct and thoughts of the individual.”

Relatedly, both accounts also seem to believe that conscience is fallible and is in jeopardy of endorsing and applying bad values or immoral standards. Sorabji argues that the values that conscience ends up endorsing and applying are in danger of merely reflecting local convention, and therefore require constant reflection, (re)education, and awareness of other values. Sorabji thinks that this point may actually be the greatest criticism against conscience: that the values it applies to our actions may be entirely or overly derived from custom or superstition.⁶⁴ Naselli and Crowley similarly identify the fallibility of conscience as such an important issue that they dedicate three chapters of their book providing answers to the following questions: (1) How should you calibrate your conscience? (2) How should you relate to fellow Christians when your consciences disagree? and (3) How should you relate to people in other cultures when your consciences disagree?⁶⁵ Both accounts also emphasize that the values that conscience applies, and thus the beliefs that it produces, can, do, and should probably change over time in light of our fallibility.

Naselli and Crowley seem to differ from Sorabji in their belief that there is, in fact, some objectively correct set of moral standards or values. In particular, they believe that the correct set of moral standards or values are uniquely Christian values and the moral standards depicted in the Bible. Sorabji might also believe that there is some objectively correct set of standards or values, but he stops short of claiming as much in developing his historical account of conscience. Naselli and Crowley seem to straightforwardly disagree with Sorabji on a different point, but their disagreement doesn't seem all that consequential to this synthesizing exercise. Specifically, Naselli and Crowley might contend with Sorabji's fundamental secularity of conscience insofar as they believe that conscience originates with, and is a gift from God, who created us in his image with this capacity.⁶⁶ But this difference doesn't seem to make that much of a difference given everything else that they agree upon.

⁶⁴ Sorabji, 220.

⁶⁵ Naselli and Crowley, *Conscience*: Chapter 4: How Should You Calibrate Your Conscience? (pp. 55-83), Chapter 5: How Should You Relate to Fellow Christians When Your Consciences Disagree? (pp. 84-117), and Chapter 6: How Should You Relate to People in Other Cultures When Your Consciences Disagree? (pp. 118-140).

⁶⁶ For a contemporary defense of the theistic origins of conscience, see: Tapio Puolimatka, "The Origin of Moral Conscience: Theistic Evolution versus Intelligent Design," in *Theistic Evolution: A Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Critique*, eds. J. P. Moreland, Stephen C. Meyer, Christopher Shaw, and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 731-54.

God-given or otherwise, the nature and function of conscience remains largely consistent between the above accounts regardless of its particular origins.

VII: Conscience and Anthropology

As noted above, Sorabji contends that, although they are beliefs and hence cognitive in nature, the verdicts of conscience are nevertheless motivating because they are value beliefs about what was or would be wrong for oneself. The value beliefs of conscience are motivating because they can cause both sentiments of approval or disapproval and painful or comforting sensations. Similarly, Naselli and Crowley argue that a major function of conscience is to judge us for how well we conform to the moral standards we endorse, making us feel guilt and pain relative to our conformity. Other theorists also seem to endorse this sort of dual cognitive-affective nature of conscience and its verdicts as well. For example, Patricia Churchland believes that the “verdict of conscience is not solely cognitive, moreover, but has two interdependent elements: *feelings* that urge us in a general direction, and *judgment* that shapes the urge into a specific action.”⁶⁷ And, according to Paul Thagard and Tracy Finn, conscience is best understood as “a particular kind of emotional consciousness, produced by brain processes that combine cognitive appraisal with perception of bodily states.”⁶⁸

There are a handful of noteworthy anthropological points worth highlighting once we endorse this sort of dual cognitive-affective nature of conscience and its verdicts. First, this view may help explain the two major historical deviations highlighted by Sorabji above. Whereas the first deviation posited two separate capacities (i.e., conscience and *synderesis*) in order to account for both cognitive and affective aspects of conscience respectively, the second deviation simply argued that conscience and its verdicts could not be cognitive and must be reductively sentimental or affective instead. If conscience and its verdicts do, in fact, possess this sort of dual cognitive-affective nature, then it is easy to see how theorists might be tempted to relegate each aspect to a separate capacity or else exalt one aspect as primary over the other.

⁶⁷ Patricia Churchland, *Conscience: The Origins of Moral Intuition* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 5.

⁶⁸ Paul Thagard and Tracy Finn, “Conscience: What is Moral Intuition?” in *Morality and the Emotions*, ed. by Carla Bagnoli (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 150.

Second, this view about conscience and its verdicts may enjoy good support within contemporary scholarship on the moral psychology of motivation. When considering the question about what exactly motivates us to act with respect to moral matters, Christian Miller points out that, according to the “so-called Humean theory of motivation, the answer is that it is our *desires*” and that its rival position “holds that sometimes our *beliefs* can motivate us to act.”⁶⁹ Given Sorabji’s rejection of understanding conscience as mere sentiment in the way Hume seemed to, and his endorsement of the motivational capabilities of the value-beliefs produced by conscience, it seems as though Sorabji might hold to something like what Miller identifies as Anti-Humean theories of motivation where “it is possible for someone to be motivated by a belief *without* desiring to perform an action, or, if a desire must be present, it is nevertheless the belief which is what motivates the person to act.”⁷⁰ Sorabji’s position, however, may also be consistent with positions like Miller’s that try to offer a third option between both Humean and Anti-Humean theories. Miller’s own position, justified by our “ordinary explanations of our actions to others,” is that, from either the first-person or third-person perspective, what motivates our actions is not necessarily our *mental states* (i.e., “pairs of mental attitudes and contents such as my belief that *p*, your desire that *q*, and her wish that *r*”) but rather the *contents* of our mental states (i.e., “that which people believe, desire, wish, and the like” or “mental representations of facts in the world”)—and “what motivates can be a good reason for action.”⁷¹ In other words, the synthesized account of conscience sketched above may enjoy good support within contemporary scholarship on the moral psychology of motivation because it seems consistent with both Anti-Humean positions (insofar as verdicts of conscience can be understood as mental states) and more third-way positions like Miller’s (insofar as the verdicts of conscience can be understood as the content of mental states).

Third, this view about conscience and its verdicts may help explain why guilt, understood as perhaps the most common verdict of conscience, is not often—if ever—characterized as a mere cognitive belief about wrongdoing or blamefulness but is rather characterized as a bodily affect often responding to wrongdoing or blamefulness. Just consider, for example, the robust, embodied implications of a guilty conscience as depicted by King David in Psalm 32:1-4.

⁶⁹ Christian Miller, *Moral Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 48.

⁷⁰ Christian Miller, *Moral Psychology*, 50.

⁷¹ Miller, 55, 58.

David does not characterize his guilty conscience as a mere cognitive belief but instead uses strong bodily imagery to describe its consequences in his life. He explains that, when he kept his iniquity silent and refused to acknowledge his wrongdoing, his bones felt like they were wasting away inside of him—so much so that he reports physically groaning all day long. He also interprets the weightiness of his guilty conscience as the LORD’s heavy hand upon his body, drying up all of his physical strength just as the heat of summer can dry up all of our strength. Interestingly, some contemporary empirical studies also seem to confirm the same sort of embodied consequences of a guilty conscience that David poetically wrote about long ago: (1) that a guilty conscience seems to produce an increase in subjectively perceived body weight and an increase in the subjectively perceived effort needed to complete physically demanding behaviors;⁷² and (2) the “pricks” of conscience seem to be associated with the sensation of physical pricks.⁷³

Finally, this dual cognitive-affective characterization of guilt may also comport nicely with contemporary theories of emotion as well.

⁷² Martin V. Day and D. Ramona Bobocel, “The Weight of a Guilty Conscience: Subjective Body Weight as an Embodiment of Guilt,” *PLoS ONE* vol. 8(7): e69546 (July 31, 2013), doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0069546. They write: “Guilt is a common emotional experience following an unethical deed. Four studies revealed how actions that imbue feelings of guilt may be embodied and can affect judgments. Extending the metaphor that guilt is a heavy weight on people’s conscience, Studies 1-3 demonstrated that immoral acts led to reports of increased subjective body weight compared to control conditions. Study 1 isolated the direction of the effect: unethical acts made participants feel heavier, but ethical acts did not make participants feel lighter. Studies 2 and 3 found that increased feelings of guilt can explain greater subjective weight, rather than feelings of disgust, pride, or sadness. Finally, Study 4 demonstrated that the same manipulation affected judgments consistent with the effects of physical weight. Physically demanding behaviors were perceived as more effortful to complete following recall of unethical as compared to ethical acts, thus indicating a consequence of the weight of guilt phenomenon.”

⁷³ Xyle Ku, Jonghwan Lee, and Hyunyup Lee, “Is Prick of Conscience Associated With the Sensation of Physical Prick?” in *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 11, art. 283 (February 21, 2020), doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00283. They write: “This study was conducted to investigate whether prick of conscience would be grounded in bodily experiences of physical prick (e.g., a needle prick), using a sample of Korean participants who were familiar with the metaphorical expression “It pricks my conscience.” The results of the study lent support to our hypothesis that prick of conscience is associated with the physical sensation of pricking. Participants who recalled unethical acts (Study 1) and who lied (Study 2) appeared to become more sensitive to the needle prick than those who did not. In addition, participants who had the needle prick made more severe moral judgments than participants in the control condition (Study 3).”

As Matthew LaPine writes: “Because of the complexity of emotion, it seems clear that some sort of hybrid theory must be put forward to accommodate both our intuitions. And most contemporary treatments of emotion do offer some sort of hybrid theory, while emphasizing one pole or the other.”⁷⁴ On one end of the pole, we have what LaPine calls the typical “Theological Story About Emotions,” which is one that “tends to be cognitive, emphasizing emotions as judgments, and volitional, emphasizing personal responsibility for emotions.”⁷⁵ On the other end of the pole, we have what LaPine calls the “Psychological Story About Emotions,” which is one that says that “emotions are feelings of bodily changes [and] more about health than morality. Emotions may evidence dysfunction, imbalance, or even unhealthy social contexts, but insofar as they are less voluntary, they are less moral.”⁷⁶ One possible virtue of characterizing conscience and its verdicts with this sort of dual cognitive-affective nature, then, is that it may situate itself nicely between the often-competing perspectives on the nature of emotions and be most compatible with contemporary hybridizing treatments looking for a third-way forward.

Joseph M. Dunne is Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Michigan – Dearborn and Concordia University - Ann Arbor.

⁷⁴ Matthew A. LaPine, *The Logic of the Body: Retrieving Theological Anthropology* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 285-86.

⁷⁵ Matthew A. LaPine, *The Logic of the Body*, 2.

⁷⁶ LaPine, 2-3.