

A PHILOSOPHICAL APPRAISAL OF CONSCIENCE AS A SUBJECTIVE NORM OF MORALITY

Charles Aruo Nnachi¹, Stephen Chijioke Nwinya PhD², Patrick Prince Ekpe³&

Denis Ejilekpang Ogwu⁴

Department of Philosophy, Religion and Peace Studies,

Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki

Corresponding Email: nwinya.stephen@ebsu.edu.ng

Abstract

This work examines the concept of conscience as a subjective norm of morality. In his quest for happiness, modern man has reduced the world to a theatre of the absurd, hence becoming wolf to fellow man. This is evident in the many atrocities people commit daily, ranging from acts of terrorism, kidnapping, wars, etc. to other minor crimes against humanity. In view of these, people often question the functionality of conscience of the perpetrators. Others affirm the efficacy of conscience with such comments as ‘my conscience would not allow me commit such evil’, or ‘my conscience is tormenting me’. All this resonate the issues what conscience is, how binding it is, its formation and how to follow the dictates of conscience. This study highlights the importance of understanding conscience as an ethical category and argues that the concept of conscience is a valuable tool for constructing moral systems, overcoming moral dilemmas, and making moral choices. The work adopted qualitative method in collecting and analyzing non-numerical data on the concept of conscience. It maintains that appropriate formation of conscience is necessary for proper judgement, and for the correction of the error in conscience and draws the attention of socializing agents to their roles in conscience formation as the individual conscience is just a microcosm of the conscience of the society.

Key words: conscience, synderesis, subjective, norm and morality

1. Introduction

Man as a rational animal always makes a rational judgment over the actions he performs or performed to ascertain their moral values. This is in line with man’s natural inclination to seek the ultimate good and to attain happiness as his end. In pursuit of his desire for happiness as ultimate good, conflict of interests may arise leading to man sometimes becoming a wolf to fellow man. No wonder the modern world is daily awash with news of man’s inhumanities to his fellows, breeding culture of death and threats to peaceful co-existence in the society. Obnoxious actions of man negate his claims to rationality and conscience in such questions as ‘do people still have conscience?’ others affirm the functionality of their conscience with such comments as ‘my conscience did not allow me to steal’, or ‘my conscience has been tormenting me for the particular action I took.’

Though people often make comments on conscience, they scarcely pay attention to what conscience really is and how it is formed. Analysts in the socio-political and religious space in proffering solutions to these modern-day challenges, among other things, point to the need for introspection which implies interrogation of one’s conscience as the basis of their subjective norm of morality.

Man’s personal experience no doubt tells him that in him exists something in the nature of inner voice, which makes itself heard in man’s personal life, especially in his moral dealings. This voice most often warns him of the moral implications of every action he is about to perform or condemns such actions when wrongly done and praises the conduct of a good action. This inner voice is the conscience. This goes to say that conscience occupies a strategic position in human lives for it is man’s nearest guide in making moral judgments. Conscience has been a perennial issue, which has not outlasted its suitability in the minds of philosophers, psychologists, religionists, etc. who research into the explanation of the mysteries behind human behaviour and action. Admittedly, there are divergent opinions about the meaning of conscience from these professional fields resulting to different notions of conscience. Thus, it is not surprising to notice conscience being expressed as: innermost psychic center, voice of God, higher self, etc. For Eboh (2005), “conscience is seen as the moral faculty which tells human beings subjectively what is good or evil and which, in turn, indicates to them what their moral obligations are in any concrete action to be performed” (p.11). Conscience, though a subjective norm of morality is the dictate of reason applied to practical and particular acts.

However, man as a moral being has the obligation to obey his conscience; to do what his conscience tells him, even when it is objectively wrong. This to a greater extent proves the fact that conscience has a binding force. In the light of this, Aquinas (1981) avers that “so far as it is through the conscience that we judge that something should be done or not done, conscience in this sense is said to incite or to bind”. So, conscience tells one subjectively what is good or evil, and manifests its moral obligation to him.

Conscience, whether a true or an erroneous one, as Thomas Aquinas asserts, binds and one who follows an erroneous conscience is not exempt from bad acts. If this is the case, where then lies the binding capacity of conscience? Does it mean that somebody with an erroneous conscience must always act wrongly? What then happens to the error involved in the erroneous conscience? Has conscience and synderesis any connection? This work elects itself to resolving these controversies. This is aimed at guiding people towards the proper formation of their conscience so as to act virtuously and not viciously.

The work adopts theoretical perspective in analyzing the concept of conscience and maintains that the formation of conscience for proper judgement is necessary and for the correction of the error in conscience, the virtue of prudence is a sure guide to the effective judgement of one’s conscience.

2. Conceptual analysis

Seen from its etymological meaning, the term conscience, is derived from two Latin words, - ‘con,’ which means – “with” and “scientia,” which means, “study” or “knowledge.” The two words when put together form “conscientia,” which literally means “knowledge with” (ourselves) (Rosmini, 1989, p.8). It could also mean a knowledge that is furnished by our inner feelings. It could also mean a knowledge that is furnished by our inner feelings. The explanation of conscience as “knowledge with” denotes consciousness, for knowledge itself presupposes consciousness. Hence, Adimonye (2003) asserts: “conscience and consciousness are kindred terms, and that means that one’s conscience is formed on the basis of what one knows” (p. viii). According to *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, conscience is always knowledge of ourselves, or awareness of moral principles we have committed to, or assessment of ourselves, or motivation to act that comes from within us (as opposed to external impositions).

For better understanding of what conscience is, Gonsalves (1989) clarifies that conscience is not a faculty of its own but a function of the intellect. Rendering conscience as ‘knowledge with’ is already a pointer to the link between conscience and the intellect. Gonsalves (1989) emphasizes that

Conscience is only the intellect itself exercising a special function, the function of judging the rightness or wrongness, the moral value, of our own individual acts according to the set of moral values and principles the person holds with convictions. (p.56)

The above understanding of conscience implies that the function of conscience is largely dependent on the amount of knowledge available to the intellect which is in turn conditioned by personal conviction. This points to the importance of one’s moral environment and the process of conscience formation to the effectiveness of conscience in moral evaluation. It is in this regard that Gonsalves (1989) defines conscience

[...] as the intellect’s practical judgment about an individual act as good and to be done, or evil, and to be avoided. The term conscience can be applied to any of the three distinct aspect of this judgment process: 1. The intellect as a person’s ability, under the influence of a desire to do the right and good, to form judgments about right or wrong of individual acts 2. The process of reasoning that we go through, under the influence of that desire, to reach such a judgment 3. The conclusion of this reasoning process, which is called the evaluative judgment of conscience. (pp 56-57)

Take away from all this is that conscience is the intellect as it passes moral evaluation on the past or present or future acts of an individual as the possessor of the conscience. When we talk about conscience, we often refer to reflection about ourselves as moral persons and about our moral conduct. Through conscience we examine ourselves, as if we were our own inner judge. Hence,

conscience could be seen as a moral judgment about man and his actions, a judgment either of acquittal or condemnation.

3. Divergent Approaches to the Issues of Conscience

A review of the ancient period of philosophical reflection shows that the first Greek philosophers were particularly impressed by the marvels of the physical universe. However, the arrival of the sophists and Socrates, in the fourth century B.C. brought about a shift of the focal point of philosophy, from the physical universe to man and the society. As such, moral and social philosophies developed and became increasingly important. Though, the term “conscience” was not so much used by the Greek philosophers, they highlighted its concept in their discussions on morality. They reflected philosophically on the nature of conscience, which they described as “self-consciousness,” in its role of moral judgment. They did not restrict it to abstract knowledge of right and wrong, but acknowledged the influence of feeling and will, functioning before, during and after the deed.

Socrates who was the founder of moral philosophy in Western civilization implied the notion of conscience in his philosophical thoughts. He claimed that he had frequently received messages or warnings from a mysterious “voice” or what he called his *‘daimon.’* This “supernatural voice” as it were, “invaded his thoughts from early childhood, and suggests to him more than anything else, his sensitivity as a visionary particularly his sensitivity to the moral qualities of human actions that make life worth living” (Stumpf, 1994, p. 36). Conscience in this sense is said to incite.

In the medieval era, characterized by belief in the supernatural being, religion and morality, God was seen as the “*Summum bonum*” the “*terminus ad quo*” and the “*terminus ad quem.*” Hence, medieval and scholastic philosophers articulated the concept of conscience in their writings. The thoughts and works of Jerome and Thomas Aquinas readily come to mind. Jerome brought a different dimension into the concept of conscience (Langston, 2015), with the introduction of the term ‘*synderesis*’ into the field of conscience. For him, it is through *synderesis* that we feel that we have committed a bad act. On the other hand, conscience is also believed to make somebody feel guilty of an evil act committed. So, Jerome maintained no duality between the two concepts, but obviously asserted that “*synderesis* is equivalent to the “*scintilla conscientiae*” (spark of conscience)” (Dagobert, 1981, p.308).

For Thomas Aquinas, *synderesis* is not a power but a habit, for rational power regards opposite things, but *synderesis* does not regard opposites, but incites to good only. He avers that *synderesis* is “a habitus of the intellect, enabling it to know the first principles of practical reasoning” (Dagobert, 1981, p. 308). He went further to say that the speculative reason argues about speculative things, so that practical reason argues about practical things. This follows that we must have been bestowed by nature, not only speculative principles, but also practical principles. Thus, he says:

The first practical principles, bestowed on us by nature, do not belong to a special power, but to a special natural habit, which we call *synderesis*. Whence, *synderesis* is said to incite to good, and to murmur at evil, inasmuch as through first principles we proceed to discover, and judge of what we have discovered. It is therefore clear that *synderesis* is not a power, but a natural habit (Aquinas, p. 407).

From this, it could be deduced that *synderesis* has a connection with the natural law, for the fact that by it, man’s reason grasps the first principles of the natural law.

However, human beings always make choices in concrete cases. It is to this exercise of choosing in the concrete situations that Aquinas applied the term conscience. Thus, he argues in the *Summa Theologica*, that conscience is not a power, but an act. This is because; conscience can be laid aside, whereas a power cannot be laid aside. He went further to point out that conscience, according to the very nature of the word, implies the relation of knowledge to something; knowledge applied to an individual case. The application of this knowledge to something, he says, is done by some act. Hence, conscience is an act.

Aquinas however, distinctively specified three ways through which conscience manifests itself in particular situations. Thus, it is said to witness, to bind, or incite, and also to accuse, torment or rebuke. In the first place, conscience is said to witness, for the fact that we recognize that we have

done or not done something “hic et nunc” (here and now). Secondly, so far as through the conscience, we judge that something should be done or not done; and in this sense, conscience is said to incite or to bind. Thirdly, conscience is said to accuse, excuse or torment, for the fact that it is through it, we judge that something done is well done or not. Aquinas explains that all these follow the actual application of knowledge to what we do. “Wherefore properly speaking, conscience denominates an act” (Aquinas, 408).

In the first place, Aquinas had argued that synderesis is the first practical principles bestowed on us by nature, and through which we are able to know and grasp the first principles of practical reasoning. In other words, that man’s reason, through synderesis, grasps the first principles of the natural law. Also noteworthy from this, is the fact that the most universal of these practical reasoning and of natural law is that “the good must be done, and evil must be avoided.”

For Immanuel Kant, conscience is conceived as a natural predisposition of the mind. It is through the preconditions of being a moral agent that it is possible to put human beings under obligation. He clarifies the content and the functions of synderesis and redistributes them between moral feeling and conscience. He remarks that “every determination of choice proceeds from the representation of a possible action to the deed through the feeling of pleasure or displeasure” (Kant 1797, 6:399). Hence, he associates pleasure with the awareness that our actions are consistent with the law of duty. We feel pleasure when we do the right thing or think about doing it, which is nothing but to act in accordance with the law of duty or we feel displeasure whenever we act contrary to it. However, medieval thinkers assume that human beings are directed towards good by nature because by nature, they possess the knowledge of the good.

Nevertheless, Kant also asserts that man is autonomous in the sense that he is the legislator of his own law. At the same time man is the subject of these laws. They are formulated by practical reasoning. It is the duty of conscience to check whether man follows the orders of the law. Therefore, Kant avers that the “consciousness of an inner court in the human being ‘before which his thoughts accuse or excuse one another’ is conscience” (Kant 1797, 6:438). He describes conscience as the duty to engage in a kind of second-order reflection, judging that one has applied moral judgments properly to oneself. In conscience, we find in ourselves a judge, who either acquits or condemns us. Kant states that conscience is an unavoidable act of judging actions and argues that it is not possible to have no conscience at all because in such a case, a “human being could not even conceive of the duty to have one, since he would neither impute anything to himself as conforming with duty nor reproach himself with anything contrary to duty” (Kant 1797, 6:401). For this reason, conscience is a sensuous pre-concept that makes the conception of duty possible, without which deeds cannot be imputable to someone. Kant’s account highlights the distinction between the source of ethical knowledge and the motivation for being ethical.

4. Philosophical appraising conscience as a subjective norm of morality

Human conduct is good or bad depending on its relation to the norm of morality. This norm is the standard with which a human act is compared and which enables us to determine if it is good or bad. In any case, conscience is judged right or wrong on the ground of its conformity or lack of conformity to the objective norm of morality. However, this objective norm of morality cannot reach its purpose and guide human actions towards man’s ultimate end, unless it is known by man and recognized in its obligatory character. So, it is conscience that does the function of telling one subjectively what is good and evil, and manifests his moral obligation to him. It applies the objective norm to particular cases and judges the relation of human acts already posited or about to be posited, to the norm of morality. In the light of this, Wallace (1979) observes that:

Conscience is an act of judgment; it is the knowledge that accompanies an act and notifies the agent of its rightness or wrongness. Because of this accompanying role, conscience is referred to as the subjective norm of morality, since it provides a personal evaluation of the goodness or badness of each individual action. (p.169).

Conscience concerns itself with the subjective dimension of morality. Granted that there are ethical values that, in some sense, can be considered objective, conscience only refers to what individuals believe, independently of any external, objective proof or justification. For instance, when

people state what they subjectively and conscientiously believe, they acknowledge that other people might as well hold different moral views. In other words, conscience could differ. Thus, the conscience of a Protestant may differ from that of a Catholic. Likewise, a Muslim's conscience may differ from that of a Christian. This brings up the issue of conscience formation, for one's conscience depicts the kind of knowledge one is exposed to and the conscience of one's moral environment.

Similarly, the duty of conscience in judgment is not in disagreement with the intellect. Rather, it is the intellect working in a practical concrete action. It is the intellect exercising a special function of "judging the rightness or wrongness of our individual acts according to the set of moral values and principles the person holds with conviction" (Gonsalves, 1989, p.51). Hence, our individual conscience is accorded the status of a supreme tribunal of moral judgment, for the fact that it, hands down categorical decisions about good and evil actions. As a function of the intellect, conscience deals with the practical question such as: what should I do here and now in this concrete situation?

Nevertheless, conscience convicts a person of wrong motive and presses the claim of the good. We are always guided by our conscience. In view of this, J. Butler avers that "... our true nature is to live virtuously, that is benevolently, under the rule of conscience..." (Hebblethwaite, 1997, p.46). And so, for one to put his conscience to sleep or to let self-deceit prevail is analogous to living viciously. Therefore, we should bear in mind the fact that a properly functioning conscience always succeeds in convicting us of the wrong we do, and prompts us to acknowledge the overriding claims of the good.

4.1. Synderesis and conscience

Though, generally, synderesis and conscience are not the same thing, but they are not distinct faculties separate from each other. Synderesis is a habit, or natural tendency imparted on us by nature, through which we naturally and spontaneously grasp the fundamental moral principles. According to Wallace (1979, p. 108), it is the habit or innate ability in man to recognize the first principle of the moral order and so of natural law without recourse to discursive reasoning. From this, it could be deduced that man's knowledge of the natural law has its internal source from synderesis. Moreover, it should be pointed out that the general concept inducing man to action is that of the good, as such the first principle of this practical order (synderesis) is that the good must be done and evil avoided.

In scholastic philosophy, Synderesis is seen as a *habitus*, or permanent, in-born disposition of the mind to think of general and broad rules of moral conduct. It is "the first principle from which a man may reason in directing his own moral activities" (Dagobert, p. 308). In the light of this, Robin Gill asserts that: "just as humans perceive the general principles of theoretic reason through the intellect, they perceive the general principles of practical reason through synderesis" (Robin, 1995, p.78). This helps in directing man to good and restrains him from evil.

However, synderesis and conscience, as we said earlier are so much related that is to say that they are not separate faculties distinct from each other. No wonder Farrell (1985) asserts that:

"Synderesis" and "conscience" must be ruled out as distinct faculties: the first is no more than the habit by which we hold to first practical principles; the second is merely a practical judgment of the intellect as to what is to be done or avoided, what is right or wrong. (p.294)

For Aquinas, synderesis is infallible, it can never make mistakes, and it is present in all men; hence no man can be ignorant of the fundamental principles of morality. To buttress this fact, Aquinas quotes Augustine, as saying: "in our natural power of judgment, there are certain rules and seeds of virtue, both true and unchangeable. And this is what we call synderesis" (Aquinas, p.407). Here, Aquinas seems to be saying that we intuitively grasp and know the fundamental moral principles. Thus, synderesis, which disposes itself to the first principles, cannot fail. Nevertheless, Aquinas observes that, synderesis, though infallible, can be obstructed. This is quite possible in persons who have physical or psychological problems, such that their use of free choice and of reason is affected. Here, Aquinas wants to show that some conditions can make some people not actualize their rationality, as they should. He described these impediments as those got as a result of injury to certain organs of the body, from which our reason needs to receive something.

Pointing out a similarity between the two concepts – conscience and synderesis, Aquinas observed that, "since habit is a principle of act, sometimes the name conscience is given to the first natural habit

namely synderesis” (Aquinas, p. 408). Despite the similarity, the two concepts it should be noted differ from each other to an extent. Conscience is informed by the chief habit, the grasp of first principles called synderesis. Thus, by synderesis, we grasp and know the fundamental moral principles, inclining us to the good. Conscience on the other hand, involves the application of these moral principles to particular cases.

It should be pointed out that conscience, being a subjective norm of morality, could err in its judgment and decisions on actions. For Aquinas, conscience errs because of an error in reason. In any case Aquinas’ interest does not lie absolutely on whether there is an error in conscience, but also on the fact of the binding nature of conscience.

Therefore, synderesis is a habit by which we know, and become conscious of the first principle of morality. It has the role of grasping the fundamental moral principles. Conscience on the other hand, applies these principles to particular actions that we intend to do. After this application, conscience comes up with a decision as to whether the proposed action should be performed or avoided.

4.2. The binding force of conscience

The concept ‘bind’ entails putting somebody under an obligation. In this context, it points to a moral obligation. Hence, conscience as a moral faculty judges human actions and also manifests man’s moral obligation to him. That is to say that it binds. Accordingly, Sidwick (1964) observes that conscience is “a moral faculty cognizance of rules absolutely binding, to be obeyed without reference to the agents’ apparent interest” (p.9).

Aquinas (1953) argues that so far as through the conscience we judge that something should be done or not done, conscience is said to incite or to bind. He explains that as conscience is the dictate of reason, it obliges the will and binds it. Copleston (2003), in view of this, says that:

Obligation...is the binding of the free will to perform that act which is necessary for the attainment of the last end, an end which is not hypothetical...but absolute, in the sense that the will cannot help desiring it, the good which must be interpreted in terms of human nature (p.408).

However, Aquinas explains this issue of conscience being the dictate of reason, obliging and binding the will, with the analogy of being physically bound, in which the power of moving somewhere else is taken away. According to Smith (1998), Aquinas in his *De Veritate* distinguishes between two types of force that can bind us. The first he called *a necessity of force* and the second he termed *conditional necessity or inducement*. The former, is likened to being bound in chains and having one’s ability to move taken away. The latter is seen as a more persuasive kind of force in which one is obliged to do something. As it were, the first kind of force “can be imposed only on physical action, while the second kind can be imposed on the will as it strives to do good and avoid that which is not good” (Smith, 1998, p. 13). In any case, just as binding a body physically takes away its locomotive tendency, in the same way, binding a will morally puts it under conditional necessity. Aquinas argues that an agent induces this necessity. In the case of the will, he says that the agent is the divine authority. He goes further to maintain that nobody is ever bound by any law except by one means alone – knowledge of the law. Thus, he asserts: “someone is only bound by the command of a ruler or lord, if the command reaches him who is commanded; and it reaches him through knowledge” (Smith, 1998, p. 14). Thus, conscience is precisely the application of knowledge of the command to a given act. Therefore, conscience is said to create obligation, or bind, by force of the divine command. Hence, one is bound by the knowledge of it.

However, the human intellect as it were, always aims at its end, which is the attainment of truth. In most cases, as it strives to attain this end; it makes series of mistakes. In the light of this, Mondin (1975) observes: “even though the proper and specific end of the human intellect is truth, there are several occasions when it does not arrive at it and falls into error” (p.32). This idea is also applicable to conscience. Though it makes a moral judgment on the rightness and wrongness of an action, and also binds, it can err in making these decisions. But Aquinas insists that the judgment of conscience should always be obeyed even when it makes this mistaken judgment. In other words, “conscience

whether true or erroneous binds.” Thus, he asserts in his *Quodlibetum*, as quoted by Omoregbe, (1991) that:

Every conscience, whether right or wrong, whether it concerns things evil in themselves or things morally wrong, whether it concerns things evil in themselves or things morally indifferent, obliges us to act in such a way that he who acts against his conscience sins (p.153).

This implies that acting against the dictates of one’s conscience is wrong, for conscience, as Aquinas sees it, always binds. One may ask: if that is the case, does it also mean that erroneous conscience binds? Granted that in its nature, it judges as good what is evil, and as evil what is actually good. Hence, it is contrary to the objective norm of morality. So, we are faced with this problem of error in conscience.

4.3 The problem of error in conscience

Conscience, as we earlier pointed out, applies the fundamental moral principles to particular situations. But, being a subjective norm of morality, it can of course be wrong in making this application, and as such, leading one to perform bad acts. In view of this, Moore (1968) asserts that “it is certain as anything can be that very harmful actions may be done from conscientious motives; and that conscience does not always tell us the truth about what actions are right” (p.180). In other words, conscience itself is fallible, and so, not a sure guide to objective morality.

On his part, Aquinas (1981) sees the problem of error in conscience from the stand point of the human will and its object. According to him, the will is to be judged good on the ground of whether the object a man wills is good. If that is the case, the question then becomes: granted that the will abides by the dictates of reason; what if this reason makes a mistake, by judging an action which is objectively evil as good, does the will become evil when it is at variance with that erring reason? The answer to this is simple, the will cannot be evil when acting based on the dictate of the intellect. If the intellect provides the will with wrong guide, then, the evil is of the intellect and not of the will. The implication is this is that erroneous conscience is not even aware that its judgment is erroneous having acted on the alternatives provided by the intellect. Therefore, erroneous conscience is binding and must be followed insofar as the owner does not know it is erroneous. This points to the importance of knowledge to the formation and proper functioning of conscience.

To clarify his position, Aquinas (1981) posited this question: “whether the will is good when it abides by erring reason”? He answers that this question is synonymous with inquiring whether an erring conscience excuses. According to him, it all depends on ignorance, for it sometimes causes an action to be involuntary, and some other times, not involuntary. So, when ignorance causes an act to be involuntary, it takes away the character of moral good and evil; but not when it does not cause the act to be involuntary. On another note, if ignorance is voluntary in itself, either directly or indirectly, it does not cause the act to be involuntary. Aquinas (1981) then concludes thus:

If then reason or conscience errs with an error that is voluntary, either directly or through negligence, so that one errs about what one ought to know; then such an error of reason or conscience does not excuse the will that abides by that erring reason or conscience from being evil. But if the error arises from ignorance of some circumstance, and without any negligence, so that it causes the act to be involuntary, then that error of reason or conscience excuses the will that abides by that erring reason, from being evil (p.676).

From this conclusion, we can now deduce that although an erroneous conscience binds, the will that follows it is exonerated from being evil, only if the ignorance of the error is involuntary.

4.4 Formation of conscience

Conscience formation is the process of learning which occurs in each person’s everyday life. It is a lifelong task that begins from childhood. Its formation is influenced by cognitive/affective development as well as the environment, hence, can be obtained through education, experience and practice. The amount of knowledge available to an individual, acquired through formal or informal

education, coupled with experiences of life help in the formation of one's conscience. It is through the proper formation of conscience that the error in erroneous conscience can be put off.

For Giubilini (2016) the external source of moral knowledge that instils moral principles in us is our own culture or upbringing. In this case, the moral knowledge in question is typically understood in a relativistic sense: our conscience is the avenue through which the social norms of our culture or the norms of our upbringing are evoked and exert their influence on our moral actions. These norms explain our moral feelings and our moral choices, but what conscience tells us in this case is the product of social and cultural dynamics over which we have little control. Granted man is a product of his environment and since our education or our culture dynamic its content can change according to social, cultural, and familial circumstances. This explains the palpable difference in the judgment of the conscience of people from different social environments. One's conscience can only deviate from that of his environment if they have external source of knowledge.

Similarly, while talking about conscience, Aquinas (1981) describes it as the dictate of reason, involving the application of knowledge to a human act (*Summa Theologiae* 1-2, q.19, aa.5-6). So, man can apply all the knowledge he possesses to an act. But, if we should consider the diverse types of knowledge a man has, it is quite obvious that in some things, it is possible to err, and in others it is not possible. Hence, it is certain that in the application of knowledge to an act, there will be error, granted that we have a lot of influences on the knowledge we have. What then happens when one applies his faulty knowledge to an act, thinking that it is right? This is the source erroneous conscience; it is based on faulty knowledge.

Contrary to the above view, the knowledge or education acquired for the formation of conscience must be a good education, which can free conscience from the corrupt influences of societies and liberates one from gullibility. Provision such education is the target of moral philosophy towards moral regeneration of the society.

5.0. Conclusion

Conscience is actually a subjective norm of morality. As such, it is often ambivalent, and on that account, unable to judge adequately what are right in particular situations. Yet, one wonders whether the moral life would have been moral without conscience. In short, it is a *sine qua non* of morality.

The nature of conscience is such that it is the act of applying the moral principles to practical situations and as a moral faculty, it is ever binding. Therefore, one has the moral obligation to follow one's conscience. It is not only a matter of following one's conscience sheepishly; one has to make sure that the conscience is properly formed. This can be achieved by seeking knowledge external to what one's social milieu provides. Conscience when properly formed and employed, could tackle the moral problems of our time. Obvious about these problems are the issues of kidnapping, terrorism, communal conflicts, war, abortion, euthanasia, etc.

The critical analyses given have also helped us produce a harmonious flow of ideas on what the concept conscience and its binding force really entail. In putting away the error in conscience, the virtue of prudence would go a long way into solving the problem of the possibility of error in conscience. Hence, we have to apply prudence in the judgment of our actions, and through this, a more virtuous act would be attained. It is prudence that immediately guides the judgment of conscience. Conscience, all said and done, remains the subjective norm of morality. One is not only bound to follow one's conscience, but to make sure that it is properly formed. Through this, people will learn not to act viciously but virtuously.

References

- Aquinas, T. (1981). *Summa theologica*. New York: Christian Classic.
- _____. (1953). *Quaestiones disputate de veritate*. Rome: Marietti.
- Adimonye, M. (2002). *My conscience: my guiding light*. Enugu: Snaap Press Ltd.
- Coplestone, F. (2003). *A history of philosophy, vol. II*. New York: Continuum.
- Dagobert, R. (Ed.). (1981). *A dictionary of philosophy*. New Jersey: Little Field, Adams & Co.
- Eboh, B. (2005). *Living issues in ethics*. Nsukka: Afro – Orbis.

- Giubilini, A. (2016). *Conscience*. In Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), (Fall 2023 Edition), *The Stanford encyclopedia of Philosophy* URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/conscience/>.
- Gonsalves, M. (1989). *Fagothey's right and reason, ethics in theory and practice*. Ohio: Merrill Publishing Company.
- Hebblethwaite, B. (1997). *Ethics and religion in a pluralistic age*. Scotland: T&T Clark Ltd.
- Kant, I. (1797). *The metaphysics of morals*. In M. J. Gregor, M. J. (Ed. and Trans.), (1999). *Practical Philosophy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Langston, D. (2015). *Medieval theories of conscience*, In Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of philosophy* (Fall 2015 Edition), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/conscience-medieval/>.
- Mondin, B. (1975). *St. Thomas Aquinas' philosophy in the commentary of the sentences*. Nijhoff: Martinus.
- Moore, G. (1973). *Principia ethica*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Omoregbe, J. (1991). *A simplified history of western philosophy* vol.I. Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Ltd.
- Peschke, H. (2009). *Christian ethics* vol.I. Bangalore, Theological Publications.
- Robin, G. (1995). *A textbook of Christian ethics*. New York: T&T Clark Ltd.
- Rosmini, A. (1989). *Conscience*. U. K: Courier International Ltd.
- Schwitzgebel, E. (2014). *Introspection, the Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (Summer 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/introspection/>.
- Sidwick, H. (1964). *Outlines of the history of ethics*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Smith, J. (1998). *Conscience and Catholicism*. New York: University Press of America.
- Sorabji, R. (2014). *Moral conscience through the ages*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wallace, W. (1977). *The elements of philosophy*. New York: Alba House Publication.