

## CHAPTER 36

# Conscience

Kostya needed money badly. That's why for a moment he was tempted to steal the cassette player he saw standing on the table in the teacher's room. The wind had blown the door half open, and Kostya could see that the teacher was not inside. It would be very easy to put the cassette player in his bag and then quickly leave the school. The chances of his being caught were minimal, and Kostya wouldn't have to worry about his debts any longer. And yet, a voice in his mind told Kostya not to do it. Kostya knew that this voice was his conscience. Why can't I just steal this cassette player, he thought as he kept walking down the corridor. Why is my conscience making life more difficult for me? I know many other people who would have stolen the recorder without hesitation. Why am I different? Where does a conscience come from anyway?

### What is conscience?

Conscience is the inner sense that enables us to distinguish between right and wrong. It is innately sensitive to the truth, points us toward the greater good and urges us to live for the benefit of others. It is the inner voice that guides us, on the basis of our general moral views, to make correct decisions in concrete situations.

Only conscience can bring together the "eternal," universal moral law and the concrete situation of a concrete person.

— Viktor Frankl

We often talk of conscience as a "force." When we follow our conscience, doing what is right and not doing what is wrong, this force becomes strong. When we are tempted to do something we know is wrong, conscience usually stops us. This is why we talk about not being able to go against our conscience.

However, once we do violate it, all its moral energy is released and becomes guilt. The stronger your conscience, the greater the feeling of guilt when you violate it. However, once you violate your conscience, it becomes much weaker because all the "force" has been dissipated. So even though you know what you are doing is wrong, your conscience puts up a weaker and weaker battle each time, and each time you violate it, you feel less guilty.

Guilt, then, is often a healthy indicator of an active conscience. If we do something we know is wrong, it is a sign of psychological health to feel guilty. If you put your hand in the fire, you feel pain. The pain tells you to take your hand out of the fire, put it under cold water and not put it in a flame again. Although we don't like to feel pain, it would be very dangerous not to be able to feel it. Guilt is the pain the conscience and soul feel when we do something wrong. In the same way, a person who has no sense of guilt is very dangerous. Conscience is our teacher. It tells us how

I feel nothing

Can bring us peace in the midst of the worries of this world;

Nothing, nothing ... perhaps only conscience!

When being healthy, it will dwell

Over hatred and evil slander;

But if it gets spoiled

With just one dirty spot,

Then you are in trouble: your soul

Will get burned as if from deadly sickness,

Your heart will be filled with poison,

Reproof will hammer in your ears,

And bloody boys\* in your eyes ...

You would like to run away, but there is no place to hide ...

That's the misery of the one whose conscience is not pure!

— Alexander Pushkin, from *Boris Godunov*

\*Pushkin is referring to the haunting vision of a king who killed his own son

Morality is rooted in religion. The internal light that helps man to distinguish between good and evil comes from the Source of Light. It is within one's conscience, conscience so miraculously free from natural human egoism, that a person feels Someone watching together with him all his actions, fulfilling His judgment, and constantly together with him.

— Sergei Bulgakov  
*The Unceasing Light*

to avoid guilt. Guilt, too, is our friend because it warns us that we are going in the wrong direction.

Each of us at some time or other has experienced the pangs of conscience. What is conscience, and where does it come from? Already the fact that everyone has a conscience proves that it is universal.

All of us know of the existence of natural laws. We are also aware of laws that govern human society. Conscience is like an unwritten law that exists in our soul. It is interesting that normally we rely much more on this internal moral law than on government statutes. One can never trace all crimes, and laws are sometimes misused against innocent people by unrighteous judges. That is why normal relationships are only possible when people have an active conscience.

In understanding the relationship between conscience and the other parts of our character, i.e., intellect, emotion and will, we see that conscience seems to stand above them.

For example, the intellect can decide whether a certain action is clever or stupid, useful and profitable or not. But something besides logical analysis influences our intellect, imposing a moral point of view and thus pushing us to choose the way that is right, even if it may be unpleasant or unprofitable. In this way, conscience sits in judgment on the intellect.

In a similar manner, volition can determine one's ability to desire something and to invest effort in fulfilling that desire. This ability can be directed to the fulfillment of an evil design, too. There are many examples of criminals who have a very strong will. So again, we see that conscience plays a role in guiding and redirecting human will.

The same can be said also about emotions. All of us want to experience pleasant emotions and avoid unpleasant ones. But if one's behavior contradicts one's sincerely held values and beliefs, the conscience will warn or punish one with negative feelings. Here, too, it is conscience that guides emotions, and not vice versa.

Even though conscience is a dimension of our character, is it also in some sense a force that is independent of us?

### *Conscience as a criterion of good and evil*

Some people think that all moral problems would be solved if people just followed their conscience. However, because the conscience is influenced by the environment, each person's

conscience will be different from everyone else's. For example, our values are heavily influenced by our cultural background. Thus, because of the dietary requirements of their faiths, it is against the conscience of Jews and Muslims to eat pork, but they happily eat beef that has been appropriately prepared. On the other hand, to Hindus, cows are sacred animals. They cannot in good conscience harm one, let alone eat one. For Jains, members of another Indian religion, all life is so sacred that they will not even disturb the roots of the vegetables they eat because they do not want to cause unnecessary harm to the plant. Unlike these religious traditions, Christianity has few dietary restrictions and believers eat any type of food without qualms of conscience.



The other point that needs to be remembered when choosing conscience as an appropriate judge of good and evil is that its formation doesn't happen automatically. To a substantial degree, we ourselves determine what kind of conscience we have.

Often during discussions about morality people wonder whether they should always follow their conscience. It is difficult to give a simple answer to this question. First, we should never go against our conscience. This means that we should never do something we know is wrong. However, sometimes when we say, "I'm just following my conscience," we really mean, "It's OK to do this because I don't feel guilty about it." For example, someone may not feel it is wrong to cheat and copy another student's work in class. In other words, he may be merely justifying doing what he already wanted to do and is not really making a proper moral judgment. So, the second part of the answer is that we have to consider whether or not our conscience has developed in the proper manner. The problem of merely following one's conscience is that it may be malformed or undernourished, providing weak signals and insufficient guidance for moral judgment.

Why cannot the conscience provide an absolute standard of good and evil? We have already discussed that each person has both good and evil within himself. That is why sometimes we are influenced by our egoistic self, our own "Mr. Hyde." This can influence our conscience, causing it to remain silent in situations when it should stop us from doing wrong. The conscience can "get lost" if it has not been properly formed by moral principles. These universal principles do exist, and they are shared by all people by virtue of our common humanity. One example is the Golden Rule that we have already discussed. It's worth noticing that it was discovered independently by people of different cultures and different epochs. If we form our conscience based on principles like this, then it will become our reliable guide in all of life's complicated situations.

### *Distorted conscience*

No one's conscience is perfect. However, sometimes a conscience can be badly formed. When this happens, the character and sense of guilt are also distorted. Four ways in which the conscience can be distorted are:

#### *Wrongly formed conscience*

Through no fault of their own, people are sometimes given information about right and wrong that is mistaken. Sometimes things that are judged to be right at a certain time in history are later understood to be clearly wrong. For example, at one time many people thought that slavery (owning other people as property) was morally justified. They did not have a bad conscience about owning slaves because of the culture in which they grew up. Now, however, slavery is recognized to be grossly immoral. Since none of us has a conscience that is completely undistorted, we should

check whether our conscience is well formed. One way we can improve our conscience is through studying moral literature generally accepted to have universal wisdom.

### *Unwarranted guilt*

Sometimes we feel guilty when we should not, and we think something is wrong when it is not wrong. A person who opposed slavery might have felt “bad” because he was going against what his parents and society told him was right and natural. There is a lot of pressure involved in going against what one has been told is right if one later comes to recognize it is wrong. Part of this pressure is experienced as unwarranted guilt.

Nobody likes to think that what he is doing is wrong, so we are tempted to change our conscience to justify ourselves. We tell ourselves that something we do cannot be wrong because it is natural and everyone is doing it. If someone questions us about our actions or suggests that what we are doing is wrong, we become upset, self-defensive, angry and aggressive.

### *Lax conscience*

This occurs when the conscience becomes less and less sensitive to right and wrong and we experience too little guilt. The following story gives an illustration:

Vladimir entered the crowded store and walked directly to the little candy display in the corner. As usual, dozens of people were swarming around the area, busily looking at the products and getting in line to pay. He remembers the first time he did this. He was so nervous, his pulse raced and his hands sweated. After he stole that first candy bar, he felt terrible. He thought about it for a long time. “What if everybody else did it?” he thought. But then, only a week later he found himself in the same store stealing again. That time it wasn’t so bad, and besides, the woman who owned the stand was always in a foul mood. Maybe if she were nicer he’d

feel worse, he thought. Now, three of his friends were waiting outside. When Vladimir told his friends about stealing the candy, one of them was upset, saying it’s wrong to take anything that’s not yours. But another friend thought Vladimir must be brave, and even dared Vladimir to steal four candy bars at one time. Now it was just a challenge. Vladimir knew he could do it, and he was glad he didn’t feel bad about it anymore.

### *Legalistic conscience*

Sometimes we get so caught up in obeying the rules that we cannot see the real needs of a situation, the whole picture, or the right order of priorities. For example, if we are in a hurry to be at an appointment and then see someone who needs our help, what should we do? Is it more important to not be late for an appointment or to help someone? It is easy to become so paralyzed by convention that we cannot follow what our heart tells us to do.



## Forming our conscience

As we now know from our discussion of human nature, our soul naturally seeks beauty, truth and goodness. This is why we are often restless. We want to move on, be more creative, learn more, be better, and find a higher standard of goodness. We are never satisfied to remain the way we are. Although an inner sense of right and wrong is part of our nature as human beings, conscience is formed or shaped by many internal and external sources over a lifetime.

The family is the primary source for our understanding of what is right and wrong. It is from the words and, even more, the example of our parents that we learn how to behave, what it means to be human, how to be a man or a woman, a father or a mother. Indeed, the moral education of children is perhaps the single most important task of parenting. Parents who have a habit of communicating directly with each other about important issues pass on to their children a sense of honesty. On the other hand, a family in which a parent lies to hide a problem, for example alcoholism, may implicitly teach the children that lying is usually better than honesty.

Other important influences are our relatives, friends, teachers, community, the media and the books we read. Our souls sift through and digest all of this, and in this way this our conscience is formed. Thus, our standard of conscience is formed by the interaction of our soul and the environment.

The next question is: Do we need a conscience? Some people find the conscience an inconvenience because it either stops them from satiating immediate desires or makes them feel guilty afterward.

The conscience should act like a compass, telling us which way to go, or at least which way not to go! If the dial of a compass is not accurate, we can easily be misled. So it is with our conscience. That is why it is important for us to spend time forming our conscience so that it is clear and straight. If we don't, we will not be able to clearly distinguish between right and wrong.

Often a situation arises in which we are confused about what is the right thing to do. This is why we often make mistakes and do things we later regret. Conscience, then, is our teacher and our true friend. It always tells us what we need to hear rather than what we want to hear. Heeding the conscience usually leads to a feeling of inner peace, a sense of integrity and of being true to oneself. Deep inside we feel good about our decision, and the happiness we experience is the result of right living.

What we take in through our senses affects us for better or worse. If we have good parents and teachers and mix with good people, we are likely to be influenced by their values to be good ourselves. If, however, we associate with people who are dishonest and corrupt, we are likely to adopt their values as our own. Some people bring out the best in us, while others bring out the worst. In the same way, some



types of literature and films appeal to and develop the good part of our soul, while others stimulate our bad side. This is why we should be discriminating about what we read and see.

We can develop, sharpen and strengthen our conscience by studying spiritually and morally uplifting literature. Our mind naturally wants truth, and when we read something that contains moral or spiritual truth, our soul recognizes it and the ideas sink into our soul and educate it. This is also why we sometimes don't like to read or listen to things that are true because we feel "judged." Even though we try to deny our conscience and escape from feeling guilty, when we are confronted with the truth, our soul automatically responds.

### *Guidelines for following our conscience*

It's not the greatness of power, or money, or physical strength, or delicious food, or luxurious clothes or other human advantages that bring us joy and peace of mind; it can be only the result of spiritual well-being and pure conscience.

— St. John Chrysostom  
*early Christian mystic*

Thus there are two aspects to conscience — knowing what is right and doing what is right. Who decides whether or not you do what is right? *You do!* You have to make decisions, and no one else is responsible and accountable for your decisions. You cannot blindly follow the ideas of anyone else. So you have to carefully and sincerely form your own conscience.

Unfortunately, it is often easier to know what is right than to do what is right. How can we see clearly through complex situations? Granted, sometimes we will make mistakes, and at other times we may intentionally do things that we know are wrong. The development of conscience takes time, contemplation and effort.