

## **Talia Hershkorn**

### **Discuss critically the belief that conscience is the voice of G-d**

There are several definitions of the word conscience, one's conscience can either be understood as their ability to judge morally their own actions or the awareness one has that an action is morally forbidden. There are also four possible alternatives to the nature of conscience. The belief that it is naturally within us as a gift from G-d, it comes as a product of rational thought, it comes from an external authority or it is a psychological function.

There are two theologians John Henry Newman and Joseph Butler who in particular hold the view that conscience is implanted in people by G-d. Newman's reasons for this belief are based on the fact that we feel ashamed or guilty if we do something wrong meaning that we have a sense that we are before someone-G-d. For Newman, then, conscience points to the existence of G-d as we instinctively are aware of being before a moral power. For Newman, the conscience not only lets us distinguish good and bad actions it also leads us to G-d. The conscience is like an inner voice that guides our behaviour and produces feelings of guilt and shame. From the conscience, Newman infers the existence of G-d. Butler argues that conscience is part of the human nature that guides us towards the moral integration of the self. Butler holds that we must obey our conscience because it is the law of our nature. This means that conscience is superior to both reason and emotions and is there to help us balance these and become as perfect as humans can. Butler argues that conscience serves to perfect us as human beings.

On the other hand, there are many theologian's who disagree that conscience is the voice of G-d. One of which is Aquinas, who believes that conscience is not naturally G-d given but a product of the power of reason. Conscience is 'reason making right decisions.' Conscience arrives at natural law, Aquinas believes all humans share a common human nature and it is working out what this is, by reason, that we can understand natural law. Sigmund Freud's views have led some to argue that conscience should be rejected. This is due to its perceived links with guilt which are considered to be unhealthy. Freud claims that conscience is due to the long period of dependence on our parents that causes their influence to remain with us even after we grow up. This is known as the 'super ego.' This clearly undermines any connection to G-d. This view is useful in allowing us to fit into society, if conscience is the belief of G-d it means it is set up by an external authority and therefore not adaptable to change. Erich Fromm a psychoanalyst distinguishes between authoritarian and humanistic conscience. The powerful influence of outside authority becomes internalized. So authoritarian conscience is a way of controlling how we behave and ensuring we do what suits these authorities. The humanistic conscience is the real conscience within us, a self awareness at how well we are doing in the 'art of living' and calls us to realize our full potential as human beings. Jean Piaget, a child psychologist identified three stages in the development of a child's conscience. The first is egocentrism, where the child pursues his wants and desires with no regard at all to those around him. The second is heteronomy, where this self-centredness changes into a rule governed mentality. Conscience now becomes an external constraint on wants and desires. The third and final stage is autonomy, the child challenges this external authority because of internal values or beliefs. Piaget sees conscience as evolving. Situation ethics philosopher Fletcher argues that conscience is

simply the term used for attempts to make decisions appropriately according to the particular situation.

There are strengths and weaknesses regarding each view. For Newman, who believes conscience is implanted in people by G-d, it allows an external authority to shape our conscience and become better people. Butler, who also believes the conscience is naturally within us as a gift from G-d, enables humans to rise above basic desires. The idea that our conscience represents direction from G-d provides an answer for several weaknesses which have been proved problematic regarding other theologies. The views of both Aquinas and Piaget who interpret the nature of the conscience to be a product of rational thought are faced with the question of how does one know what is rational is right? There is no clear definition of what is even rational. Freud who states that the conscience is a psychological function which comes from an external authority (viewing this as a bad thing-‘super ego’) does not consider any positive values one may get from parents or authoritative members of society. Fromm, who distinguishes between authoritarian and humanistic conscience rejects the idea (as does Freud) that authority can be good and does not explain where humanistic nature comes from.

However, there are also criticisms regarding the belief that the conscience is the voice of G-d. With Newman’s theory, one does not know if there even is a G-d, there is no proof. A further weakness is that the theory does not describe a course of action when facing the dilemma regarding a conflict of solutions between G-d and the state. Butler’s theory is also flawed in that it excludes the influence of society as well as there being no specific way for one to know exactly what G-d wants them to do. These weaknesses contrast to some of the strengths of other views based on alternative natures of conscience. Aquinas’s theory involves rational thinking which enables one to decide for themselves what is right and wrong, as well as explaining why people do wrong through logical reasoning known as synderesis rule. Freud allows one to let go of guilt and acknowledges social influence. Lastly Fromm explains the distinction between authoritarian and humanistic conscience therefore we can explicitly see where we get our right and wrong from, as well as giving people the chance to be individualistic and have influence and input in the path they choose to follow. These theories therefore prove to be rational views with logical explanations which some may feel overcome the weaknesses of those who portray the conscience as direction implanted by G-d.