

## Chapter 5: Conscience

*“... those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end, for they do so with the approval of their consciences”.* C. S. Lewis, *The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment*

Recent research has confirmed that the need to believe oneself to be a moral person is a basic human psychological need (Prentice et al., 2019). Evil is a perversion of morality, and Nazism and Communism provided false moralities, which claimed that anything is justified if it helped bring about the utopian society its ideologues preached, enabling millions to collaborate with evil.

Hitler said he was answerable only to his own conscience. The historian Claudia Koonz has documented how, using philosophical and scientific concepts, the Nazis constructed a perversion of morality that they believed justified their crimes. Denying any objective, universal morality or values, according to the Nazis morality evolved according to the needs of ethnic communities, and they promoted a morality they thought appropriate for the superior Aryan race. Thus, “The road to Auschwitz was paved with righteousness” (Koonz, 2003). According to Koonz, the Nazis appealed not so much to malevolence but to ideas of health, hygiene and progress, and to what was claimed to be the most advanced biological knowledge of the day. Asserting as an axiom that the life of a *Volk* is like the life of an organism, they used the language of parasitology to describe Jews as a biological threat to Germany.

Prestigious professors engaged in this scholarly normalization of evil. Philosopher Martin Heidegger issued a “call to arms” and “intellectual summons” for “stepping into line with the times” and articulated justifications of Hitler and Nazism. Jurist Carl Schmitt claimed that history originated with Cain and Abel, not Adam and Eve, and defined politics as the battle between ethnic friend and enemy, from which he concluded that the most important task was to distinguish friend from enemy. This is a vivid illustration of the self-deceptive mechanism of splitting. Schmitt worked out a theory of justice based on ethnic communities working out moralities appropriate to their “blood and soil”; he defined authenticity as allegiance to one’s *Volk*, made *that* the basis of his morality, and taught that the duty of political leaders was to enforce this perversion of morality. Gerhard Kittel developed a theology that complemented Heidegger’s and Schmitt’s philosophies and purported to show that, while antisemitism might *seem* immoral, it was actually supremely moral, requiring the virtue of courage (Koonz, 2003). What a spectacular example of the sin against the Holy Spirit – calling what is false true and what is true false – that Christ said was the one sin that could not be forgiven (Matthew 12 31-32; Mark 3, 28-29).

Science was also put in the service of perverting morality. Early in the Nazi regime, Heidegger and Schmitt joined physician Walter Gross, head of the Nazi party’s Racial Party Office, at a public lecture in Heidelberg. This was one of many activities intended to “educate” the public and put an acceptable face on actions that, without first perverting morality, would have been unacceptable. Biology and medicine were transformed from the latter half of 1933 on to include Nazi racial ideology (Evans, 2005). Koonz is of the

opinion that, when Gross burned his files at the end of the war, he erased evidence that would have incriminated over 3,000 willing collaborators – in other words, exterminated the evidence. Students shared in this scholarly normalization of evil. The Nazi Student League stated:

*“that we ... will intervene where the National Socialist view of the world is not made into the basis and starting point of scientific and scholarly research and the professor does not of his own initiative lead his students to these ideological points of departure within his scientific or scholarly material”* (Evans, 2005).

The Nazis in fact felt frustration with the general German population not adopting Nazi principles anywhere near as wholeheartedly as desired. Koonz argues, convincingly in my opinion, that rather than antisemitism driving the rise of the Nazis, the Nazis used nationalistic pride (group narcissism) and moral concepts to promote antisemitism. They looked to “racial science” to provide credible evidence of objective moral validation of Nazi crimes. Collaboration was particularly common in genetics and physical anthropology. When the desired evidence could not be found in biology, the regime shifted the burden of proof to social sciences and humanities (Koonz, 2003).

Koonz delineates three sources for Nazi morality: i) the role of Hitler as preacher and paragon of communitarian morality and virtue; ii) the effort of scholars and bureaucrats such as Heidegger, Schmitt and Gross to create a perverted morality; and iii) the debate within Nazi policy circles to evolve a policy consensus on racial aims and policies that enabled them to appear not as clear evils but as the shadow side of virtue. Koonz holds

that to understand Nazism and the Nazi regime, we need to take the Nazi claim to be propagating a moral order seriously.

Communism also presented a perversion of morality that justified monstrous crimes on a colossal scale (Trotsky, 1969, 2017). Solzhenitsyn states (Solzhenitsyn, 1973):

*“To do evil a human being must first of all believe that what he is doing is good, or else that it’s a well-considered act in conformity with natural law. Fortunately, it is in the nature of the human being to seek a justification for his actions.*

*Macbeth’s self-justifications were feeble – and his conscience devoured him. Yes, even Iago was a little lamb too. The imagination and spiritual strength of Shakespeare’s evildoers stopped short at a dozen corpses. Because they had no ideology.*

*Ideology-that is what gives evildoing its long-sought justification and gives the evildoer the necessary steadfastness and determination. That is the social theory which helps to make his acts seem good instead of bad in his own and others’ eyes, so that he won’t hear reproaches and curses but will receive praise and honors. That was how the agents of the inquisition fortified their wills: by invoking Christianity; the conquerors of foreign lands, by extolling the grandeur of their Motherland; the colonizers, by civilization; the Nazis, by race; and the Jacobins (early and late), by equality, brotherhood, and the happiness of future generations.*

*Thanks to ideology, the twentieth century was fated to experience evildoing on a scale calculated in millions.”*

C.S. Lewis wrote of the “poison of subjectivity” (Lewis, 1967). From the late Renaissance on, conscience began to be seen as infallible and a guide to virtue (Koonz, 2003). According to Pope Emeritus Benedict (Ratzinger, 1984/1991), this subjective view of conscience has led to a false opposition between conscience and authority. People today often see their subjective consciences as the defender of freedom against authority. But there are no norms if each individual can decide for himself what is good and evil. If it is true that there is no truth in moral and religious matters, argues Benedict, then no freedom exists and the dictates of conscience are just reflections of social circumstances; therefore the notion of freedom in opposition to authority must overlook something.

According to the Pope Emeritus, although one is bound to obey conscience even if it is mistaken, there must be other reference points outside the self. The Pope Emeritus lists several factors necessary for morality: conscience, shared experience, reality itself, and God’s revealed will for us. Without these counterbalances to our subjectivism, we are left with the totalitarianism of the powerful’s arbitrary decisions. If good and evil are determined by individual judgment, then there is no objective standard of good and evil, and those with power can impose their will on others with no complaint from conscience. Since the disposition to do good and avoid evil is part of human nature, this makes them less than fully human. Relativism, says Benedict, always leads to the tyranny of those with power over those without power.

Benedict believes that community (which is a lot different from a mob) is another guarantee against subjective conscience. Individuals only perceive a part of reality, which narcissists confuse with the whole of reality. Individuals have a responsibility to speak the truth about that part of reality that they are in contact with, but their true selves do not exist in complete isolation from the others selves in the community. With a narcissistic conscience, there is no mediation between multiple subjectivities. The Christian community, we believe, is in touch with reality, including God's revelation and Christian tradition. The Christian God is not a God in competition with the community but a God encountered in the community, the church. True conscience is a guarantor of a sound morality formed by reality itself, by community, by God and one's subjective perceptions and decisions. It is also a defense of the weak.

A malformed, erroneous conscience may have appeared to make life easier for those under communist or Nazi rule by sheltering them from dangerous truths that would have required enormous courage to speak. Instead of seeing an objective truth, outside what was safe, recognized by others who valued truth more than convenience or even life, and serving as a baseline for community, they ended up with a subjective view that was not challenged. Such a conscience justifies social conformity to a perverted morality. As Benedict says, if erroneous conscience justifies, "then the Nazi SS would be justified and we should seek them in heaven, since they carried out all their atrocities with fanatic conviction and complete certainty of conscience". If we accept that a subjective conscience is infallible even if false, and that people must act in accordance with subjective conscience, then since Hitler and his accomplices were deeply convinced of

their cause, they were acting morally, subjectively speaking. Benedict considers this proof that such a concept of conscience must be false. He quotes psychologist Albert Görres

*“the feeling of guilt, the capacity to recognize guilt, belongs essentially to the spiritual makeup of man. This feeling of guilt disturbs the false calm of conscience and could be called conscience’s complaint against my self-satisfied existence. It is as necessary for man as the physical pain that signifies disturbances of normal body functioning.*

*Whoever is no longer capable of perceiving guilt is spiritually ill, “a living corpse, a dramatic character’s mask”.*

Someone in this state is not only lost and alone in a fantasy world, it isn’t even their own fantasy world; it is imposed by those who happened to have power. Since their conscience no longer told them that there was an objective reality that might not be what the powerful were imposing, it made them impenetrable to God and enabled them to not see what they do not have the courage to see. They did not know because they wanted to not know in order to protect themselves. Benedict concludes from this that:

*“It will not do to identify a man’s conscience with the self-consciousness of the “I”, with its subjective certainty about itself and its moral behavior. On the one hand, this consciousness may be a mere reflection of the social surroundings and the opinions in circulation. On the other hand, it may also derive from a lack of self-criticism, a deficiency in listening to the depths of one’s own soul.”*

When subjective conscience occurs in a totalitarian society, whether left or right, there is a blunting of the moral sense on a massive scale. The perceptions of people living in a system of deception becomes distorted, and whole societies lose the capacity for mercy, truth, love and goodness. Thus, following an erroneous and subjective conscience is only at first convenient. In short order, it leads to the dehumanization of everyone. The poison of subjectivity (to use C.S. Lewis' phrase) does not liberate, it enslaves. We become totally dependent on the prevailing opinions, which with modern technology are easy for the powerful to manipulate. Conscience then becomes mere rationalization, a classic self-deceptive mechanism. When this fails, the power of an omnipotent state can be used to silence all but the bravest individuals.

Citing John Henry Newman, Benedict argues that the middle term between authority and subjectivity is truth. The primacy of conscience is therefore linked to primacy of truth. Conscience does not mean that the subject is the standard in a truthless world, which lives with a compromise between the individual and the claims of the social order. It is the perception of truth by the individual personality, overcoming or going beyond its subjectivity. Truth is one of the three transcendentals – the stuff that God is made of - the other two being goodness and beauty. Truth must have priority over group consensus and accommodation. We are never justified to protect our false selves and acquire approval on the part of prevailing opinion at the expense of truth. Doing so reduces conscience to social advantage, group consensus or the demands of social and political power.



According to Benedict, in the modern world the concept of truth has often been given up in favor of the concept of progress. Of course, if there is no objective truth, anyone can decide his or her own truths and anything can count as progress. Truth is therefore the very reference point of thinking. Modern totalitarian states desire to make truth no longer visible. What they present as progress is not based on a standard that is true itself, but on their decisions, and ultimately what is expedient in their eyes. When truth is no longer sought, power decides what is true or false, good or evil. The true evil of a believing Nazi or Communist was not that they lacked a conscience, but that their erroneous consciences urged them to build a society based not on universal morality or objective values, but on what they convinced themselves were better than universal morality and values. What would have stopped them is for enough people to have the virtues and true conscience to the extent that would have enabled them to refuse to cooperate with evil, and to seek and tell the truth, even if it meant death for them. Peck proposed historical research on evil. I submit that one research project would be to document the various moralities with which both individuals and groups have rationalized evil deeds.

In order to avoid misunderstanding, nothing above means that God wants us to be crushed by our guilty consciences. As C.S. Lewis says somewhere, Christ did not come primarily to bring new moral teachings; those were already around, and largely agreed upon across cultures, before the Incarnation. Pope Emeritus Benedict says that Christianity dissolves into moralism if no objective truth that surpasses our own subjectivity can be discerned. In Greek mythology, he points out, the Furies/Erinyes are

mythological personifications of conscience, *which are transformed into spirits of reconciliation*. Conscience's indictment is not the last word. The Truth is a person, in fact the second person of the Trinity. In Him you will find grace that allows truth to be redemptive rather than crushing. The Truth does not just make demands of us, He transforms and pardons us. Otherwise truth is too difficult for us, and fear of it drives us to flee from it. Only this makes us able to hear conscience with joy rather than fear.

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